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THE DEVIL'S PLAYGROUND

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The Devil's Playground

A Story of the Wild North West

By JOHN MACKIE

London

T. FISHER UNWIN
PATERNOSTER SQUARE

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THE DEVIL'S PLAYGROUND.



CHAPTER I.

"THE HUSKS THAT THE SWINE DID EAT."

"THE greatest mistake a man can make," philosophised the Sage, "is to fall in love with a married woman. Of course I never did anything of the sort myself; but I've watched fellows get that way and reckoned they were to be pitied. I call it a mistake; because I don't believe that any one in his sober senses, when he first feels himself attracted by his neighbour's wife, dreams of allowing such a suicidal condition of things to get the upper hand of him. But what he does not want to do, and what he eventually does, are only separated by a matter of sentiment to begin with, and amount to the same thing in the end. If he is one of the unfortunate ones—all heart and no head—he drifts into it like a man who has been fooling about in a small boat above Niagara

Falls, and whose fate is a foregone conclusion. The first step in this direction generally begins with a mere mutual attraction; the next, some fancied affinity. Then comes the inevitable 'something stronger,' until the last state of that man is worse than the first, and the finish up is either a most unpleasant racket, or—at least something that is equally unsatisfactory. It is one of those things in human affairs that a fellow can't take philosophically."

The speaker was a fresh-faced youth, as yet with only the callowest kind of down upon his upper lip. There was the unmistakable stamp of gentle birth upon his face, and the tell-tale one upon his personal attire, that plainly spoke of having "come through the mill." In fact, so far as the outward appearance of both he and his companion were concerned, no one could have told them from a couple of ordinary labourers on the tramp. Their clothes were of the commonest description; and to tell the truth, there lurked a suspicion about their linen of an absence of soap and water. The elder of the two was a tall, spare man of perhaps a trifle over thirty years of age or so, who, despite his commonplace and not too well cared for attire, would have attracted attention anywhere. He was dark, self-possessed, and alert-looking; and there was that touch of devil-may-care good nature upon his not unpleasant face, that stamped him as one of the rolling-stone species. One who by some accident or other, had fallen or drifted from a

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better state of things into an easily borne condition
of hard-upness. One who had missed his vocation in
life, but whose talents were versatile. One without
any particular aim or object in view; for whom
poverty had no particular terrors, or riches power to
stimulate; and who could shoulder a pick, or drive a
nail across paper with equal equanimity. Such a
man was the exclusive and patient audience that the
younger one commanded.

They sat with their backs against a log upon the
banks of a creek, and lazily smoked their pipes.
Whether the keen, dry air of a Canadian North-West
had exercised a somniferous effect (to which prairie
air is conducive) upon the elder of the two; or per-
haps it was the sage remarks that fell from the lips
of his youthful but experienced companion, for several
times his head drooped forwards, then was jerked as
suddenly backwards. Perhaps after this, for another
twenty seconds or so, he would catch the drift of his
companion's remarks, and would listen with some
vague consciousness of being amused. Dick Travers
was evidently a good listener; he seldom interrupted,
and the Sage proceeded—

"I remember a case where a Platonic, milk-and-
water sort of chap became spooney on a married
woman; but his platronics took the inevitable turn.
He dangled after her for years; took to writing
poetry and all that sort of thing; neglected his
business in consequence, and finally went to the

dogs. And the best, or worst, of it was that the woman didn't care a rap for him after all!"

At this point of the narrative the elder, who had a minute before nearly jerked his head off, caught the drift of the Sage's remarks and queried—

"Petrarch?"

"Oh, Petrarch be hanged!" shortly contended the Sage, with an uncomfortable sensation that his senior was chaffing him. "I told you I knew the man."

"Ah! poor old chap; I didn't drop to it at first. How old are you now?" asked the other with an irritating air of sympathy.

"Twenty-one in November," began the Sage unsuspectingly, and stopped abruptly. "But hang it, man, I'm not the fellow any more than Petrarch was!"

Then, becoming conscious of something incongruous in the association, he laughed in a silent, irritated sort of way to himself, and for a few minutes relapsed into a discreet silence. But the Sage was no fool, and despite his weakness for airing his views upon life and things in general, often hit upon some subtle truths which might have been evolved from a more colossal experience than his could possibly have ever been.

The day was close and sultry: the valley in which they were shut out any breath of air which might be straying away above them on the higher lands. The creek had dried up to an almost imperceptible shadow

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"THE HUSKS THAT THE SWINE DID EAT." 11

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of its former self, but still kept murmuring over the
ocks and gravel in a subdued and expostulating sort
f way. Up on the bench (as the plateaus are called
n North America) it was little better; in fact the air
as if anything more suffocating than in the coulee.
From the north and east there rose a range of hills,
whose rugged sides were covered with timber. But
o the south and west the prairie rolled away in a
eries of wave-like buttes and coules; only broken
y an uncertain, thin, green streak of timber, which
inged and marked the course of the creek upon
which they were camped. There was no sign of
human habitation on that prairie. It seemed, in spite
f its rich-looking pastures, as desolate as any desert.
Had it not been for a few straggling head of horses
nd cattle hard by—slowly making for the creek, as
if they found the heat of the prairie unendurable, and
ould stand it no longer—it might have passed for a
eritable No Man's Land: a country in which nobody
ved. But perhaps the predominant feature of the
cene, and that which impressed the beholder more
owerfully than any peculiarity of either earth or sky,
as the silence of this land. It was a silence that
ade itself felt: it was portent with a sense of loneli-
ess. Had it not been for the faint murmuring of
he shadowy creek, the whole scene might have be-
longed to some lunar landscape—some dead world in
which no note or sound ever broke the eternal silence
f death.

"I say, Dick," the younger man suddenly exclaimed, "has it not struck you that we're getting a little further from civilisation than we bargained for? They told us at Walsh that we were sure to strike a ranche of some sort out here, where they'd want hands for some coming 'round-up' or other. We've walked fifteen miles or more this morning already; but if there are any ranches I think they must be gopher ones, or where they rear prairie-chickens."

"Well, yes, I suppose it has struck me," answered the other unconcernedly, as if it were a matter of no particular importance. "I rather imagined a couple of hours ago or so that we had taken the wrong trail; but I didn't think it worth while mentioning the fact. You see, Jack, to quote your own words, 'there's nothing like taking things philosophically.' I've been doing it these last four or five years; actual experience has only gone further to convince me that it's the best way after all. Why don't you practise what you preach?"

"Oh, hang it all, you know, Dick!" answered the Sage, "that's expecting too much of a fellow to practise and preach both! You surely don't want me to be inconsistent? One would think, to listen to you, that I was anything but practical. Now I would humbly venture to remark that I am eminently so; and to prove it I will point out that though we've had a good meal—that's to say, as good as we're in

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the habit of having in this vagabond existence of
ours—we have not got quite enough for another. A
couple of sailor's biscuits—feliculously called 'hard
ack'—and a quarter of a pound of cold bacon, is all
we have left in the commissariat department. More-
over, 'the night cometh when no man can work,' and
the shade of a cotton-wood tree is a poor apology for
a blanket in a climate like this. By Jove, Dick, don't
you know, I often feel like that chap in the parable,
who filled his belly with the husks that the swine did
eat."

Poor young Sage! But you are not the first
gently-nurtured youth who has felt the same thing,
—Australia, Africa, Canada are teeming with such as
you.

The Sage had broken off abruptly in his unwonted
speech. To do him justice, he was not in the habit
of allowing his surroundings to affect his spirits.
But there are times, which come even to the most
hardened, when the 'still, small voice' within us will
not be stilled, and plays the part of an avenging
Nemesis to our lives.

The Dick referred to glanced suddenly and sharply
at his companion; and something very like pity
showed for an instant upon his face. Then, as if he
had something disagreeable to say, he stared right
ahead of him, and tried to infuse a certain amount
of hardness into his voice as he said—

"Now, Jack, you're talking sense, and touch upon

a point that's been on my mind for some time back. I think you are wasting your time. You never did anything that in the Old Country you need be particularly ashamed of—neither did I for that matter, only that I was a cursed fool. You have got a good home to go to, and here you are playing the very deuce with your expectations; and all for what? Simply for the privilege of leading a vagabond existence like this; of wandering from one place to another, and having to submit to all sorts of hardships and discomforts. You were with me on the diggings at Shingle Springs, and you know what killing work that was. We harvested down in Wyoming; and you remember how you said that another month like that would make an old man of you. Now I don't see that our prospects are likely to improve. You've had a row with your people because you wouldn't stop at home and become a respectable member of society; when all that was asked of you was to sit in an office for a few hours every day. Take my advice, Jack, pocket your pride and go home; write and tell them you're coming and follow the letter up—depend upon it, they will be glad to see you. I daresay I'll miss you now and again, but fancy that after a bit I'll find it rather a relief to be rid of you."

"Dick," said the other, staring in a deliberate fashion at the opposite bank, "I believe you do want to get rid of me. I believe there are lots of billets I've

some time back, you would have taken if I had not been saddled to you! "

You never die. "Stop that d——d silly talk!" said Travers, rather inconsistently, considering what he had just said a minute before.

You need be particular for that matter. Well then, Dick," said the younger man, taking notice of his companion's seeming display of temper, and proceeding as if he had suddenly caught a glimpse of sunshine through a fog, "why don't you practise what you preach, and go home too?"

Have got a good minute before. "Because, lad," was the reply, in a tone that showed he did not exactly relish the subject, but with an assumed jauntiness in his speech, "I could not better myself by so doing. Besides, to play the rôle of the prodigal son, argues a home to go to, and a father or mother, as the case may be, who is willing to let bygones be bygones. Now there is no haven like that and become a home. If I did arrive in the Mersey to-morrow, and en all that was wanted to telegraph ahead the orthodox 'fatted calf for a few hours for one,' there is no one I could address it to. No, pocket your pride but the old sod could awaken nothing but vain regrets. I've made my bed and must lie on it."

you're coming on it, they will And here, as if offering an involuntary protest to ss you now and his jaunty form of speech, he sprang to his feet and find it rather awkwardly and down for a few minutes, with his hands thrust deep in his trousers pockets.

in a deliberate The Sage, otherwise known as Jack Holmes, eyed ve you do want him strangely.

e lots of billets "I've stirred him up again," he muttered to himself.

"Poor old Dick! he has been pretty badly hit at some time or other, and now he must walk it off. Then aloud he said, "I say, Dick, don't you think we'd better get under weigh? It must be three o'clock at least; let's take the trail going up the creek. I fancy we are bound to strike that Englishman's ranche they were talking about, and we can get shelter for the night anyhow, if we can't get work. By Jove! I believe we're going to have a thunder storm—do you see that big, black cloud? What would you'd rather not go to any Englishman's? Well, as I'm a sinner, you're a queer one!"—Travers had with a preoccupied air, dissented from his companion's proposition.—"Phew! how stifling and sultry it has got all of a sudden. Let's march."

They picked up their belongings, which, like the enterprising prodigal's in the parable, could not have been of any particular inconvenience to the carrier, and, turning their faces up the creek, trudged on their way.

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CHAPTER II.

“COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOWS BEFORE.”

It was a large, roomy, two-storied log-house, with a wing at the back, and weather-boarded on the outside. In Ontario, or any other part of the world, it would have been considered only a very ordinary place of abode. But up here in the Cypress Hills, where you might travel for twenty miles and not see a house, it seemed a veritable palace. It had actually a French window looking to the south, which suggested a higher civilisation than one would have expected to meet with, in such an out-of-the-way part of the world. But perhaps it was the peculiar situation of this house, that was its particular charm. It nestled at the foot of a steep, savage-looking, pine-crested crag, which here and there was streaked with warm dashes of pink—the work of Mother Nature; a fringe of tall, dark pines behind and on one side of it, and a lawn-like stretch of softest prairie in front, which sloped gradually down to a little lake. Away to the south rolled a vast, billowy ocean of prairie of

a dun colour, which in the far distance became so undefined and spectre-like, that it was hard to determine the horizon line: so gradual was the change from earth to sky, and such an air of dreamy unreality seemed to pervade it.

It was a spot for a house that none but an artist could have chosen, and the party who had chosen it was an artist and a woman. Her husband, Tom Tredennis, was an easy-going specimen of the sporting Briton. He had reached the mature age of seven-and-thirty without ever having known what it was to earn a day's bread, being well endowed with the world's goods, when one fine morning, several months before this notice of him, through the death of a younger brother, he discovered that he was the possessor of a cattle ranche in the North-West Territories of Canada. This younger brother—whose existence had nearly escaped his recollection—had been an anomaly in the family—a worker. He had, by a certain amount of natural ability and perseverance, built up a ranche and a herd of cattle, the brand of which was known far and wide. Tom was long-headed enough to know, that unless he himself took a journey across the Atlantic to look after the property, he would be the loser by the omission. He suddenly recollected that in one of his very recent letters home, his brother had spoken about the bear that came down from the mountains in the spring and killed his calves. He also remembered having

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heard from some other "rolling-stone" who had been out there, of the bands of antelope and blacktail that ranged over these hills, and that settled the matter. He quickly came to the conclusion that poor Hector's affairs must be wound up by him alone, were it only out of respect for that poor brother he had seen and thought so little about. A good excuse for a prolonged sporting tour was what he had long wanted; he had one now. And then another difficulty suddenly confronted him. He somehow was not remarkable for forethought. There was a contingency he had not provided against, and that was his wife.

A few years before he had been the most exemplary of lovers; he had an easy-going self-assurance about him, that carried him triumphantly through love, as it generally did through all other things. He had fancied himself genuinely in love with the girl whom he afterwards made his wife, and who was at least twelve years his junior. When he married her out of that house where she lived—being an orphan—when a straight-laced uncle and aunt who had a large family of their own, he fancied he had done rather a sensible thing, and something that he would never regret. Perhaps he had never regretted it; but it had sometimes suggested itself to him, that his wife had not been quite as much in love with him, as he had been with her. In fact, when on that momentous occasion he had (with only a little less of his self-

assurance than usual) asked her to be his wife, she had told him as much.

And then he had made a little speech which is as old as the hills, and which is unlike most speeches made in the pages of fiction, in that it frequently finds utterance in actual life.

"I can hardly expect," he had said, "that one like you, can fancy all at once an ordinary sort of fellow like me. But this I think, that if you like me just a very little, you will come to care for me through time just as much as if you had allowed your heart to run away with your head."

And the high-spirited girl consented to be his wife not that by so doing she would escape from a home where she was anything but happy, to one of luxury and ease, but partly because she had a genuine admiration for the man who did not insult her by holding out these advantages before her, and who, if anything rather underestimated any redeeming qualities he was possessed of. It was about this time that the irrepressible Mrs. Grundy hinted, that the real reason of her casting in her lot with one whose tastes were so dissimilar to hers, arose from pure motives of pique; an old lover who had gone abroad was about to marry some one else. But there was, perhaps, just as much truth in this as in any of Mrs. Grundy's other statements—at least so far as Mrs. Grundy's actual knowledge extended.

For some time after his marriage, Tom Tredenn

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"COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOWS." 21

was perhaps not without a curious vein of speculation as to why his wife should be possessed with such a feverish desire for change, and seemed to dread anything like the dulness of provincial life. Without having any particular tastes in common, they pulled together as well as most newly-married couples do. For a while he denied himself many of his accustomed pursuits, to bring her nearer to him than he felt she was; but gradually and imperceptibly he lapsed back into his old bachelor ways, and they drifted apart. But still, they never positively clashed. He thought as much of her as ever, but it was not in his undemonstrative nature to show it. As for her, she at least admired him for the many sterling qualities that made up an honest if not exactly a congenial spirit. However, much to Tom's surprise and greatly to his relief, when he told her of the business that would take him away from England to Canada for several months, and asked her whether she would prefer to rough it with him for that time in the Northwest, or amuse herself the best way she could in England while he was away, she jumped at the first alternative, and betrayed an eagerness to be off that puzzled him not a little.

"I am sick of England," she had said, "and have been pining for a change like this ever so long."

And, considering that she had enjoyed more of her share of change, as enjoyed by the average British patron of the monied class, it dawned upon him that

he was as far from understanding her as ever. But he suddenly recollected that he would require an "Express" rifle or two, and here his speculations promptly ceased.

They came out in the spring, and both were charmed with the fresh and peculiar features of the Cypress Hills and prairie country—she from an artistic and picturesque point of view—she was an artist of no mean promise,—and he from a sportsman's who had found a mine of wealth in fresh fields. In short, instead of selling the ranche, he determined to keep it on. There was a good Scotch foreman on the place, and it would pay him handsomely to do so. They could come over and live a month or two on it every year. His wife chose the site for a new house, some distance removed from the old log one, the corral, and other buildings. In a month or so the new house was run up; and as she had brought her maid with her, and easily procured from a town bearing the picturesque name of "Medicine-Hat" all the help she wanted, and, with what was of more importance, plenty of money, she soon had a house that looked to a certain degree home-like.

And now on the day spoken of in the first chapter of this series of events, when the two peripatetic philosophers were plodding wearily along the trail in the direction of this particular ranche, Mrs. Tredennis sat looking out upon the dun-coloured prairie. A short time before, the heated waves of

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air had been distorting it into all sorts of fantastic shapes. But a huge bank of clouds had rolled up, and there was an ominous stillness in the air.

That she had a striking style of beauty her greatest detractors could not but admit. She could not have been much over twenty-three years of age or so. She was only an ordinary sized woman, but her physique was perfect, and spoke of health and training which gave a more queenly grace to the charm of her well-poised head. A transparent freshness of complexion was hers, and a wondrous harmony of feature. But these attributes alone could not have distinguished her from the general run of women. It was the expression and character in her face that so many of her admirers had vainly tried to analyse. Her lustrous and large eyes were pregnant with a light that betokened no ordinary mind. It would have been hard to determine of what colour these eyes were; they might have been blue, or grey, or hazel; they seemed to change with every mood that possessed the mind of the owner for the time being. But, after all, there were those who said that the expression in them was not always a happy one.

And just then, perhaps, they would have been justified in saying so. But she was roused from her reverie by a prosaic interruption.

"I want you to catch on here, Chrissie," said Tom Tredennis, her husband, dressed in a rough tweed suit, with a gun barrel in his hand, and a cleaning

rod projecting a foot or so from the same, as he entered the room. "You see I wrapped too much tow round this confounded cleaning rod, and it has got jammed fast. As next to myself you're the strongest individual in the house at present, I thought I'd ask you to pull against me."

He stopped opposite her and regarded her smilingly, as if it were only the most matter of fact thing in the world he asked her to do. He was a good-looking fellow enough, sunburnt, bearded, and with a frank, honest expression on his face, but with no marked expression or feature that would have distinguished him from the average good-looking and healthy, well-born, sport-loving Briton.

She turned from the window. "Then you must let me get my back to the wall, Tom. You're such a giant—for if it should give all of a sudden——"

She smiled pleasantly as she poised herself and caught the cleaning-rod in a business-like fashion.

"Now, then, twist to the right, and I'll twist to the left," she said.

A short, sharp tug of war, and in another second the refractory rod was safely extracted.

"Well done!" he exclaimed, looking at her admiringly; but whether in admiration of her fair young English face, or at the workmanlike way in which she had helped him, it would have been difficult to speculate upon.

"I'll give you a kiss for that one of these days if you behave yourself," he added, playfully.

"Why not now, Tom?" she rejoined, looking at him with a sudden, shy light on her face that would have settled the matter with most men. "The mood does not strike you quite so often as it used to, and you know delays are dangerous."

She had never spoken to him like this before.

"Well," he answered, laughing, and examining the choke of one of the barrels which he held in his hand critically, "you might give me credit, you know, and I'll give liberal interest when I pay you."

He might have only wanted to tease her, after the fashion of some men, who have far-seeing views in regard to the policy of not making themselves too cheap. But he kissed his hand to her, which, for an undemonstrative man like him, was a remarkable concession, and left the room.

He could not see her face as the light left her eyes, and that inscrutable look came into them—that look which some one has painted as ever haunting the sad eyes, and resting upon the sweet face of the Egyptian queen—fateful and weary, as if from some hope long deferred.

She sat looking out upon the little lake, and away over the billow-like expanse of rolling prairie. It was growing remarkably dark, and the stifling heat had given place to a sudden cold rush of air. Then a far-off, muffled roar was borne upon it. It gathered strength, and changed into startling, portentous peals as it travelled nearer and nearer. Then a thunder-

clap right overhead, that rattled and echoed away among the crags and wooded heights, like a *feu-de-joie* from a battery of artillery. She sat immovable through it all, when suddenly her husband entered the room.

"Why, Chrissie, what a queer girl you are, to be sure—you've got the window open, and you're not scared a bit, as nine women out of ten would be." And he hastily closed the window.

It did not enter into his calculations that she might be the tenth woman.

As if roused from a spell, and conscious that she must have seemed strange to him, she appeared anxious to talk, and he sat down opposite her.

"Tom, talking of painting, do you think that sulphurous colouring in that great cloud over there would be difficult to catch? If one could only convey the idea of its being instinct with some coming evil! You see, one must suggest more than what is merely physical nowadays."

She said this as if it had only that moment struck her, and not as if it had arisen from some train of thought that suggested a natural sequence.

"Pshaw! Chrissie; I daresay a dash of burnt-sienna mixed with a little yellow-ochre, or some blend of that sort, would about hit it off. I'd prefer a gayer subject myself. I am afraid you've a morbid sort of fancy."

She neither winced nor bit her lip, sensitive as she

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naturally was. Even a child will become apathetic after a time, when its disposition is not understood and it is habitually snubbed. It only seemed as if her eyes became darker in their colour, as she gazed fixedly out upon the darkening landscape. Suddenly she exclaimed—

"Look, Tom!—don't you see them?—a couple of men on foot, I declare!—the first human beings I have seen come from the direction of that great lone land where nobody lives."

"By Jove! so there are!—your eyes are sharper than mine. American deserters, I should say; and they've come out of their way—most horribly out of their way, from Fort Assiniboine. They must have had a lively time of it, without a house for considerably over a hundred miles. Phew! it's beginning to rain in earnest. What on earth can they be stopping for, I wonder?"

The men he referred to could be seen now upon a rising piece of ground, against the grey, portentous sky, where that mysterious light threw them out into strong relief. The taller of the two seemed to hesitate at a trail which would have taken them directly west, and away to nowhere in particular; and the other had advanced a few yards on the trail that led direct to the manager's house and other buildings of the ranche. They seemed disputing as to which they should take. At last the taller of the two seemed to have been influenced by the other, and

both came leisurely in the direction of the buildings before mentioned.

"How strange!" Mrs. Tredennis remarked; "it is raining heavily, and they don't seem to hurry a bit."

"Probably a wash is a novelty now and again to them," he remarked. "By Jove! though, how opportunely the rain has come; it will put some water in the creeks for the stock."

"I suppose, Tom, MacMillan knows enough to do what he can for these poor fellows, whether they are deserters or not?" she said, paying no heed to his practical remarks about the water in the creek.

"Of course, my dear; and we want men badly just now. Whether they are deserters or not, if they can only sit on the back of a horse, or can cook or do anything at all, I should like to secure them for the 'round-up.' I'll hunt up my waterproof, and just step over to MacMillan's after a bit."

In half an hour he rose and left; in another half hour or so he was back. The lamps were now lit upon the table.

"It is a 'rocky' night, as they term it in this country," he remarked, as he entered the cheerful room. "Do you know, Chrissie," he continued as if imparting something that had evidently impressed him, "that we have two rather uncommon visitors at MacMillan's over the way."

"American deserters?" she queried.

"Guess again," he said.

"Tramps?" as if it were of little interest to her.

"Hardly," and he seemed to enjoy the association of ideas. "Well, they are tramps, perhaps; and in appearance they don't belie the title; but I know English gentlemen, born and bred, when I see them."

"How interesting; the prodigal of the parable," she remarked wearily, "or some poor fellows who have not found pupil-farming as lively as they expected, and find looking for work not a trifle livelier. But, oh! I'm in an uncharitable frame of mind, and should not talk like this. I hope you will do what you can for them, Tom. What did they say for themselves?"

And now she betrayed a little more interest, and looked at her husband, who continued—

"Well, one of them, the elder of the two, had precious little to say, and it struck me he didn't care about saying any more than he could help. Not a bad-looking sort of fellow, but a devil-may-care one, it wasn't hard to see. But the younger of the two—I wouldn't suppose him to be more than two-and-twenty or so—is a character in his way. To hear him talk you would suppose him to be about sixty years of age, and with all the experience of an eventful lifetime; he appears to be an anomaly. When I went over to MacMillan's they were drying their clothes, which were very so-so articles indeed. I asked the elder of the two where they were bound for. He replied, 'Right on, wherever that may be;

anyhow, it isn't of much consequence whether we get there or not. In fact, we'd as soon not get there.' Cool, wasn't it? Had it not been for his manner, which was perfectly good-natured and courteous, I would have considered this answer savoured of flippancy. Then the younger fellow chipped in, and said they were looking for work, if they could get it; but his comrade said that, 'so far as he was concerned, he thought he'd go on a little farther—he had enough for a few more meals.' And here the two had an argument—the one wanting to go on, the other to stop. The upshot of it was, I offered them good inducements, and said they could try it for a couple of weeks, when, if it did not suit them, they could go if they wanted to. They consented, so I suppose they will start in to-morrow. Upon the whole I like their style; they are at least respectable; and, if they have not got all the experience one would wish, they can learn. The sight of some of those nondescript cowboys—who have an idea that by putting on a pair of leather chaperegos, sticking a revolver in their belt, a slouch hat on their head, talking through their noses, swearing, and whose sole ambition is to be considered 'tough'—makes me sick. What are you thinking about, Chrissie?" he added, after a pause.

She had been sitting with her hands folded on her lap, and with a troubled air. She roused herself with a start, and regarded him strangely.

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"Things I don't think you would understand, and would only laugh at me if I told you of," she answered indifferently. "However, as your queer visitor over at MacMillan's remarked, 'it's of no consequence.' I have had a queer fancy all day, and thought this morning that it would wear away with a headache, but now it's stronger on me than ever."

"Thunderstorms often have that effect upon certain temperaments," remarked Tom. "I hope you haven't caught a cold, Chrissie; that would be rather an unpleasant thing; colds are built that way. You kept that window open rather too long, you know. But I must go and finish my gun-cleaning; I cannot leave that to any one. I should advise you to go to bed as soon as possible, and take something, in case you have got a chill."

Oh, honest but near-sighted Tom, whose panacea for all ills is to take "something"—the even-flowing current of whose nature never was disturbed by more than a cat's-paw of passing emotion—you little know of the hidden depths and under-currents of some natures, which are so far beyond the ordinary touch of heart and brain.

Then, when the dusk had passed into darkness, and the thunderstorm had passed away, the stars gleamed through the blue, and the goddess Night reigned over one half of a weary world.

CHAPTER III.

"WHAT CHANCE HAS BROUGHT YOU HERE?"

IT was indeed a glorious morning when Dick Travers and Jack Holmes awoke. The sun was already up, and looked as if he intended to make up for his eclipse of the previous evening, by shining out a little sooner and fiercer than usual. "Just wait a little," he seemed to say, "until I get a little farther up, and then I'll roast you a bit!" For in this land of extremes, the sun either sulks altogether and hides himself, or else comes out bold and strong, meaning business.

They had slept over-night in the men's quarters, which was a comfortable weather-board building attached to the manager's house, whose wife, Mrs. MacMillan, prepared the meals of the two or three men generally employed on the ranche. MacMillan was already up; he was a dark, wiry-looking man, with a pleasant Celtic face; he might be bordering upon forty years of age or so. As our knights of the trail were dressing, he sang out to the other two men who occupied two of the other bunks in the hu.

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MacMillan seldom betrayed any Gaelic accent save under some strong emotion; he had been for the greater part of his life in Canada. The two men whom MacMillan called to got up when called.

One of them was an active young fellow, with a pleasant face, called Reynolds, who gave the newcomers a cheery good-morning; but the other was not quite so pleasant to look upon. He was of that neither-fish nor good-red-herring type, which Tom Tredennis had on the previous night characterised as "tough," or at least whose sole ambition was to be considered so. He drawled his speech through his nose, was always talking about getting "the drop upon his man," and as he once had been a cowboy in Montana, had generally some wonderful experiences to relate, in which, of course, he always figured in a more or less heroic light. He generally managed to insinuate in the course of his conversation that he had the reputation of being considered "bad"—on "the other side." He would have considered he lost in dignity to be seen without his heavy leather chaperegos, and his great Mexican spurs which jangled like cowbells. His revolver was nickel-plated, and the handle was of mother-of-pearl. He seemed to have a horror of a barber, and his general appearance was dirty, if not forbidding.

"Waal," growled that worthy, "I don't mind gittin' up at a reasonable time; but dern me if I ker about gittin' up in the middle of the night!"

But he had made a slight mistake ; he had not given MacMillan sufficient time to leave the room.

"I beg your pardon ; did you speak, Billie ?" asked that individual, opening the door a little and looking into the room.

"I sed right ye er', guvnor. 'Flip' is the word !" answered Billie, with apparent alacrity.

The door was closed, and MacMillan had gone. Then Billie's eyes wandered over the new-comers.

"Hilloa, my cocks !" he remarked jauntily, "'pears to me you're gittin' a rustle on. I guess as much as you're new to this life. Tenderfoots always is that way."

"What did you have the goodness to observe ?" inquired Dick, regarding him quietly and with that disconcerting eye of his, that sometimes had an unpleasant fashion of making the person on whom it was fixed feel ratner uneasy.

Billie at first honoured him with a surprised and savage glare, then over his dirty face there spread a wan and sickly smile as he answered—

"Never mind, pard. I likes my little joke, I does. I remarked as how you were an early bird, thet's all."

"Oh ! that was all, Mr.—I didn't catch your name—well, Billie, if you will have it so ; anyhow Billie is shorter and sounds more friendly. My name's Dick. I thought you said something about 'tenderfoots,' but must have been mistaken. However, it's of no consequence."

Here Reynolds turned his back to the company, and his shoulders were seen to shake suspiciously ; which latter action was not lost upon the keen-eyed Billie, who muttered something under his breath.

Then the party adjourned to the stables, and after the horses had been looked to they began their rough and ready toilets for breakfast. As there was only one tin wash-basin in the quarters, Dick remarked to the Sage that he would go down to the lake. Going out bareheaded and in his shirt-sleeves, he shouldered his towel, and went down through the drenched and resin-scented pines towards a little promontory on the lake.

It was indeed a lovely morning ; Nature, which had been drooping and withering for some weeks, seemed to have taken a fresh lease of life, and gone back two or three months into the spring again. The very birds seemed jubilant over the change ; and the rich and varied colouring of the great crags on the mountain-side shone out clear, vivid, and translucent, like the delicate veins on a pebble after it has been immersed in the wet. It put Dick, for all the world, in mind of a bit of old-country Highland scenery ; only the tinting of the whole was richer and warmer. Dick looked around him admiringly ; he had not thought there was such scenery in the North-West. He felt as if he could take a fancy to this place ; but somehow—and he could not account for it, he felt as if he would rather work for any other

than his own countrymen. Of course the company he had to mingle with might not be exactly congenial; but then he had not been in a position to choose his company these last few years, and he still had the Sage, who always amused him. After all, he might just be as well here, as anywhere else.

He performed his ablutions in the lake, and was going slowly up the narrow, gravelly beach under the dark bank of pines, his eyes fixed on the ground before him, when suddenly a shadow fell right across his path. Looking up, a woman stood right in front of him.

There are times when mere ejaculations of surprise fall ridiculously short of the emotions that call them into existence. This lady, in her light morning dress and her bare head, stood as if turned into stone. Her face was pale as death, and her great brown eyes stared at the man before her, as if she beheld some visitor from the other world, instead of the very ordinary figure of a young man in his shirt-sleeves, and with a towel loosely flung over his shoulders. Her lips parted, but only an indistinct sound came from them.

Travers in his turn took a step backwards, and drew a limp hand across his eyes as if the sunlight dazzled them. Both stood speechless for what seemed to be an interminable age. The man was the first to recover somewhat of his composure.

"You!" he managed to stammer. "You! Chrissie

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—I suppose, though, that your proper name is Mrs. Tredennis."

"Oh, Dick!" she cried almost piteously. "What chance has brought you here—and like this? I thought you were still in India."

And now the man had become more fully the master of the situation and himself, and with an evident effort he kept his demeanour subdued and respectful. The shabby, threadbare clothes he wore were forgotten now; only the man and the gentleman asserted themselves. He spoke, and his voice was calm and even dignified; but his eyes betrayed the indignation that stirred within him.

"Yes, Chrissie—I beg your pardon, Mrs. Tredennis. Things come about strangely, don't they? You may be surprised to see me here, but I don't think you need be to see me like this."

He paused an instant, and drew his breath in short, quick gasps; as he continued to speak his indignation got the better of his self-possession.

Then, as if it gave him some relief, he asked her if she remembered the story of the past. Did she remember how when he had lost his patrimony in the Old Country, he had offered to free her from her engagement to him? How she had said that the mere loss of money made no difference, and she would wait until he had made a home for her in that far land to which he proposed going—she would even go with him, if he would let her? He had gone to

Ceylon, and had worked for her day and night. He had even deprived himself of the necessities of life, so that he might all the sooner make a home for her. And how at last, after two weary years of waiting, when he had gone down to Colombo to meet her whom he expected out by the first ocean liner to be his wife, he found, not her, but a letter, couched in guarded, sympathetic terms instead, from an old friend of his, telling how that the woman who had promised to be his wife was already the wife of another man. They wrote and told him how she had married money. And then—but perhaps it did not matter to her what happened—he had never cared for money, at least only when he was making it for her. He had never gone back to that home which he had prepared for her, and where smiling native servants were waiting to welcome home the “mem sahib.” He left that beautiful land which had been such a terrible mockery to him ; and since then with only a love of seeing strange peoples and countries to gratify, he had been a wanderer on the face of the earth. Of course hard-headed (and harder-hearted he might have said) wiseacres called him a fool : in all probability he was one, but that only harmed himself. True, he had not drunk himself to death, or committed moral suicide. But she had destroyed much of his faith in women—in such as her wholly—and robbed him of all incentive to ambition. And then he finished by saying—

"Of course I ought to have known, fool that I was, that you could never have cared for me. If you had been honest with me on one occasion you might have saved all this—but you were not. You had not the moral courage, but let me go away first; and judging me by your own shallow soul, thought that I could forget you, as easily as you could forget me!"

"Oh, stop, Dick, stop, you are unjust to me——"

Her face had grown pale as death; her dry eyes were wild and strange as she looked upon him, and her hands were held out piteously towards him. But he interrupted her.

"Pshaw!" he said, sneeringly, "your actions have proved how much you reverence justice. Why make yourself seem more contemptible than you really are—if that were possible?"

She held out her hands appealingly to him, as if to stop him, and as if his words cut her to the quick of her woman's nature. It was truly a strange meeting. It was not a pleasant thing to see this girl, who was indeed a queen amongst women—who had that self-possession which only birth, or consciousness of innate powers can give, and who possessed intellectual and physical gifts which raised her above the less favoured and more emotional of her sex—swayed by a tempest of passion like this, and the prey of a perturbed mind. The pallor of her countenance only seemed to heighten the largeness and darkness of her eyes and hair; she looked like a woman from some

dark page of history supplicating before a stern, unbending power, for the life of some one who was near and dear to her. At first she had looked upon him in a surprised and perplexed way, when he had poured out the torrent of an angry and injured nature upon her. Once or twice it appeared as if she would break in upon him with some word of dissent, or was about to ask him a question; but he had always stopped her with a gesture of impatience. All at once as he proceeded, a light seemed to break in upon what was evidently perplexing her, and she gradually became calmer. At last, in spite of his words of scorn, some settled, high resolve seemed to take possession of her, leaving its impress on her face and giving her courage.

"Better let things remain as they are," she had said despairingly, as if she did not care whether he listened to her or not. "You may learn differently yet; but it is perhaps better that you should think of me as you do."

He only caught imperfectly the tenor of her broken words; but he was too much incensed to consider their import. He continued bitterly—

"You may save your words for those who will believe them. You need not think that any piece of woman's acting can succeed in justifying the wrong you have done. You are a woman, but I call you a murderess; for a heartless jilt is nothing else."

Again she held out her hands with a quick im-

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pulsive gesture to him as if she would stop him ; then dropped them helplessly by her side. But still, strangely enough, she never took her eyes off his face. And they were truthful, honest eyes enough, in spite of all he had said about her ; albeit, there was a startled and hopeless look in them. She found her voice again—

"I may deserve all you say about me," she said, "but there is one thing I would ask you to bear in mind, and that is, that my husband is blameless in this matter. I don't suppose he ever knew I was engaged to any one, far less ever heard your name mentioned. You need not visit the blame on him."

As she looked at him again, her eyes seemed to take in his worn, clumsy boots, whose uppers seemed about to part company with the soles—his dirty cord trousers, on the right knee of which there was a great unseemly patch of some foreign material—the cheap blue and white shirt ; but of more importance than all these things, the weary lines of care upon his handsome face. And, strange anomaly, as she looked, something very like a great pity dawned upon her face and dimmed her eyes, although in vain she strove to conceal it.

He had watched her face keenly, and she seemed to recover her self-possession somewhat as he asked—

"Well, are you satisfied ?"

She took no notice of his remark, but paused irresolute for a moment, and then said—

"I have no right to ask, but are you going to tell my husband what you have told me, and proclaim my worthlessness?"

"If he has not found out what you are long ago," was the quiet reply, "he will find out soon enough without me telling him. I see you judge other people by your own ideas of revenge."

He paused for a minute as if to consider, and then continued—

"No ; if your husband married you without knowing that you were engaged to some one else, I shall not tell him. It is sufficient that one life should have been made miserable through you." He did not spare her but went on unmercifully—"But if I were to punish you by that measure which you would mete out to other people, I would proclaim you for what you are. From what I saw of your husband last night I took him to be an honest man, at least I bear him no grudge, poor dupe that he is! I engaged to stop here with him for a month, but hope he will let me go. It will be as well that you and I should be apart ; yes, as far as possible. It is a strange thing that yesterday, when I stopped at these cross trails in the thunderstorm, I was haunted by a sense of some impending evil, and hesitated to take the trail that led to this place."

And she, did she remember the weird, sulphurous, thunder-cloud that had seemed to her so full of evil portent? Surely some subtle magnetic force had

been at work to tell the other of a disturbing presence.

"You had better not go, Dick ; for really—and you need not believe it unless you like—I cannot think of you wandering about like this. I need not ask you to allow me to do anything for you, because I know you would not have it. Don't suppose I mean to insult you by talking like this, I am not offering you anything. But one thing (and I do not ask it for the love you once bore for me, seeing its object was so worthless) I would ask of you, and that is not to leave this place just yet. Tom, that is, my husband"—she spoke these words almost under her breath—"will think it so strange if you go so suddenly and without any apparent reason. After all, what am I to you now that you should allow your movements to be influenced by me? You need see nothing of me."

He gazed curiously at her for a minute or two as if considering, and answered—

"No, I do not see why you should influence my movements; but you are nothing to me now, and you shall not influence them. I have agreed with your husband to wait until at least the 'round-up' is over; I don't suppose it would matter much to him if I left; but I shall stay till that event comes off, then go. Until then you can enjoy the novel sight of me working as your husband's hired man. It will be one of those phases of life that you used to be so fond of studying. You need not be afraid of me saying any-

thing about your past ; for this I know, if there is such a thing as a Nemesis in this life of ours, you will suffer for your past some day."

Mechanically he inclined his head, and without bestowing another look upon her, he left her standing there, trembling and dazed. Did she remember the last time they parted, when she had clung to him and wept upon his breast ? It seemed as if his words had already come true, as if that Nemesis had already overtaken her. For she gazed after him with a hopeless look in her eyes that was not without a touch of wistfulness ; and then, with that smiling autumn landscape grown dreary and wintry-like to her, she walked slowly towards the dun-coloured house.

In spite of herself, it was with a guilty feeling she approached it, and went in by a back way. It appeared to her as if the very servants eyed her suspiciously. And when her husband heard her footsteps, and called out to her from that room sacred to his guns and pipes, she did the same by way of answer, without entering, in dread lest he should see her—

"Just wait a minute, Tom, until I dress."

"Dress !" he called back ; "why, you've been out for an hour and more ; but I don't wonder, it's a sin to be indoors on such a morning as this. I only wanted to tell you that I breakfasted without you. There are some blacktail deer up on the bench ; I'm going out after them, and won't be back until

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evening. A Mounted Policeman brought some mail for you this morning—you'll find it on the dining-room table."

As if for an excuse to avoid meeting him, she ran to look at her letters, and opened them eagerly; but, to tell the truth, felt little interest in them. She told the servant to remove the breakfast things; said she had a headache and could not eat. But there were two in "West-end" coullee who had no breakfast that morning—for that was the name of Tredennis's ranche.

"Hilloa! Travers," said MacMillan as Dick approached the manager's house, "we've had breakfast; but I guess the missus has kept some for you. We'll have a smoke and wait for you outside. There's no particular hurry this morning."

"Thanks," said Dick, "I ought to have told you I intended to do a bit of a starve this morning; feel a little queer—a touch of an old fever. I'll just tell Mrs. MacMillan and be with you in a jiffey."

"Toots, man, you just go in and get a cup of strong tea from the wife; it's none of your poisonous green truck; it'll do you good."

Dick thanked him again and went in. In the doorway he met the Sage, who eyed him keenly.

"Hilloa, old man, what's up?" exclaimed that individual. "Seen the ghost of your revered uncle and the spirits of the unredeemed? Why, what is the matter? you're looking queer."

"Seen a ghost of the past, Jack, that's all," replied Dick. Then, becoming conscious that he had excited the Sage's curiosity, he continued, "The fact is, I saw Billie putting on his revolver, and his Mexican spurs. I think the sight rather upset me. Had no idea we had fallen in with such a lawless crowd. By the way, Jack, I wonder if we could borrow a shoemaker's awl and a wax-end? I fear my Parisian made boots are in a state of approaching dissolution. However, I'm afraid it's a case of putting my trust in Providence until evening: shall have to, anyhow."

His boots had not given him a thought till then. And it was a significant fact that ere he had done speaking about them, he must have forgotten the fact of his comrade's presence, for he said, as if to himself, "I wonder what possessed her to ask me to stay? Can she have nosense of shame?"

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CHAPTER IV.

HER HUSBAND.

MRS. TREDENNIS sat nearly all the forenoon in one place, close to the open window, where she could see the far-stretching vista of rolling prairie, on which the heated air-waves danced, and played all manner of hobgoblin tricks with the physical features of that lonely landscape. Here, there was a cliff with a bold front and a fringe of scrub growing atop of it, where she knew there was nothing but a level piece of prairie. And there, was a lawn-like stretch of smoothest grass, where she knew the prairie was bare and broken. The sun beat fiercely down, as it does late in the fall in these parts; and had it not been for the thunderstorm of the day before, it might have been unpleasantly sultry. For once Mrs. Tredennis took no interest in the face of Nature. Hers was an artist's temperament, and in art lay her refuge when there was a jarring in the wheels of her existence. There were those who had predicted a great future for her; but somehow she would not tread in the beaten and conventional paths of legitimate art. She

was always seeking after that which was uncommon in Nature, which in fact almost bordered upon the unreal. Her landscapes suggested an infinite eeriness and sense of solitude, which would strike and haunt the beholder long after they had been looked upon. When she gave these landscapes life, she gave them a fitting life ; her figures suggested a tragedy obscure, but none the less subtle and pathetic. Perhaps there were no artists she more resembled in her choice of subjects than the Americans, Vedder and Church, differing as they do in some points. Although the critics admitted the beauty and truthfulness of treatment in her work, still, because she was a "departure" they would not recognise her. Abuse must precede fame, and the founding of a school : when the art critics denounce, the curiosity of the public is aroused, and if there is anything in it, some one with more moral courage and discrimination than the others will point it out. Then, straightway, the whole world will say, "We thought there was something in it, though we could not exactly say what it was"—and then—applause.

And still the lonely figure by the window sat and gazed over the ever-changing mirage on the prairie. Some letters lay open on the table beside her ; but it was not these she was thinking about ; she might have been one of these solitary figures from one of her own paintings, so suggestive was she of some deep-rooted trouble. For now she found herself, per-

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HER HUSBAND.

haps, in the most humiliating position in which a woman can find herself—despised by the man whom she had loved, and for whom yet, perhaps, the old passion was not quite extinct. She had thrown this man over in a moment of pique, and when she was, perhaps, perfectly justified in doing so, provided that what she had heard of him were true—were true?—that was exactly where the trouble lay. But her conduct had been guided by those whom she had been taught from her childhood to look up to as unimpeachable and inviolable; and now the traditions of her youth had received a severe shock. She realised that undoubtedly she had been deceived by those who ought to have shielded her from deceit. She had been a creature of impulses, and now they bid fair to wreck her future happiness. The words of him who had reproached her, and the man himself as he stood before her, had carried conviction home to her. She had sometimes thought with the spirit of a high-minded girl, before she had married Tredennis, that if in the years to come should ever chance throw this man across her path, how she would wither him with her scorn and contempt, and make him feel—if he were capable of feeling—the stings of remorse. After she had renounced him, and had, on the return of cooler judgment, come to the conclusion that it was the height of folly to condemn herself to live a solitary, joyless life in a household where she was anything but happy, she banished him from her thoughts

—at least so far as she could. She would show him of what little account she considered his shallow love; and in a moment of pique she had consented to marry. From a worldly point of view she had no cause to regret her marriage; she occupied an assured position that many natures as free from mercenary considerations as hers, would have considered a prize amongst a thousand. To her husband she strove to be a good wife and true; if she did not love him, she at least respected him, and tried to bring herself to love him.

But now, the tables were turned with a vengeance, and she occupied that place herself: an object of contempt and scorn, which she had imagined one day Dick Travers would occupy. She found that instead of being the wrong-doer he was the wronged, and a powerful revulsion of feeling was the result. And now a sickening fear of what the consequences must be if she gave way to those feelings, presented itself to her.

Mrs. Tredennis did not dream of being disloyal to her husband even in thought; but it was significant that already she had almost begun to pity that husband in her heart: before whom in the future she must necessarily play a double part.

But her's was no weak nature; for while her conscience had upbraided her when she had looked upon the world-worn face of the man she had once loved, a resolve, that could only have arisen from a mind of

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rare truthfulness and courage, suggested itself to her. She would let this man believe that she was all that he said she was. She would suffer the mental humiliation of being considered shallow, mercenary, and worse, in order that no greater evil might arise. For, if she had chosen to speak—she had been on the brink of it more than once in her interview with him—then, instead of upbraiding her, he would have pitied her; one kind word from him, and she, with her impulsive nature, would have been for the time the slave of her emotions, and the mischief would have been done. Her second thoughts had been to send him away from her, and to appeal to his sense of the fitness of things: that it were better now that they could not be too far apart. But then Mrs. Tredennis had noticed his careworn face, his shabby clothes, and his general appearance that of one who finds it hard to get along in the world—so different from what he once had been. Her great, woman's pity for him overpowered all other considerations, and she sacrificed her feelings in order that perhaps she might further his worldly well-being. Perhaps she had some vague idea, that if he came to see her in the prosaic and commonplace rôle of the British matron, and came in contact with her now and again, he might come to see that she was a much more commonplace being than he imagined. Possibly, even, he might come to rejoice in his free existence, and to think that after all the loss of her was not a thing to be so very

much bemoaned. With an utter absence of any vanity, Mrs. Tredennis never considered for a minute what effect her presence might have upon him. In such affairs, strangely enough, it is the most important factors that are lost sight of. In any case, she would strive to do her duty: how far she would succeed remained to be seen. She would not fly from the danger; she thought that in boldly facing and combating it lay the surest defence of both. She would take up her neglected Art again and find in it her principal distraction.

Mrs. Tredennis rose, and opening a side door entered a long, well-lit room, which was built out from the main building. A large table littered with sketches stood at one end of the room. A small Broadwood piano in a plain oak case, that was beautiful in its simplicity, stood in one corner; an easel with an unfinished sketch on it stood in another. A few choice proofs of engravings were on the walls in plain Oxford frames; a few portfolios of engravings and a pile of books and magazines stood in another corner. Altogether it was a thoroughly business-like studio, and suggested work rather than a mere retreat to gratify a dilettante adornment.

Mrs. Tredennis approached the unfinished sketch upon the easel and looked curiously upon it. It was a purely fanciful sketch, and represented a woman with a strikingly beautiful face, upon a low, sandy shore, looking out upon a weary, shoaling sea, upon

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whose surface nothing was visible but a wandering sea-gull, whose presence only accentuated the loneliness of the scene. And in the face of the woman there was the look of one who had waited long ; there was an apathetic, troubled brooding—a consciousness as of hoping for what is hopeless. Perhaps there was some subtle affinity between the condition of her own mind and that which this sketch represented : which she did not altogether care to admit to herself in her present condition, and which was not exactly in harmony with her new resolves.

"This will not do," Mrs. Tredennis said half aloud. "This will not do at all. The principal aim of Art ought to be to represent the beautiful and true, in a manner which will elevate and render happier the greater portion of humanity. There is something morbid in this picture which is positively unwholesome, and which is not calculated to leave a pleasant impression." She felt half inclined to take a brush that lay handy and smear the surface of this sketch ; but she felt loth to destroy what had been the outcome of her own creation. She threw a light cloth over it instead, and left the room. Then for the next few hours she went about the house, talked to the servants and superintended various household duties, and was surprised to find what a relief this busying herself with matter-of-fact details was to her. It was only as the dusk crept on that she sat down by the open French window to take a few minutes' rest. She

had not sat long when she heard a quick, firm foot-step outside, and in another minute her husband strode into the room.

"Dear me! in the dark as usual," he remarked, brusquely. "How you can sit moping in the gloom puzzles me." Then he continued, as if he were conscious that perhaps the tone of his greeting were not exactly that which the occasion called for. "However, I suppose you've either a good deal of the owl in your composition; or else—you know what the Scriptures say—'They love the darkness rather than the light, because their works are evil.'"

She had started guiltily at the sound of his voice, and perhaps it was as well for her that the room was in darkness. Even his concluding sentence seemed to have a peculiar significance for her. It was the old case of the cap fitting. What a number of caps we poor mortals don in our time!

Tom Tredennis laughed not unpleasantly, and continued rapidly: "However, Chrissie, I'm wasting precious time. Get me something to eat right away. You've waited dinner for me. Oh, bother! I've shot a couple of blacktail deer up Stony Creek, about six miles from here; and if I don't get back, the wolves or perhaps a bear will have made a meal of them. Parade the banquet. In the meanwhile I'll go, engage one of our newly found pedestrian friends, get a pack-horse, and after dinner go back to where I left the deer, and bring them here to-night. The moon is about full, I think."

"All right, Tom ;" and she hurried away to "hurry up" the dinner for the hungry sportsman ; leaving that individual to grope his way to the gun-room in the dark, where he speedily struck a light : first refreshing himself with a modicum of mountain-dew, and filling his cigar-case. He shoved some explosive cartridges into his belt, and made his way back to the sitting-room again.

A small table for two had been laid ; but, considered in the light of a dinner, it was a unique affair. For, by the time Mrs. Tredennis had finished her soup, her husband had called for, and finished, his more substantial second course ; and when Mrs. Tredennis had placed a small cutlet on her plate, Tom rose from his seat with the intimation that "pudding was a bad thing to work on, and she really must not mind him leaving her."

Mrs. Tredennis found that her appetite had gone. She had tried to draw her husband into conversation, by telling him that she had received a letter that morning from the Dalton girls—whom he had admired so much down in Montreal. Who, after having gone through to the coast, and stopping off at Banff, in the Rockies, would stop off and spend a month or two with them ; and how that, as his cousin, Ned, was coming, they would have a lively household. But her husband only replied absently (as if he had been asked for an opinion on a totally different subject) to the effect that "he thought

explosive bullets would be the best thing to take. You see, one might meet with a bear, which animal was on the increase in certain parts of the Cypress Hills (since they were not hunted so much by the breeds and Indians as in the old days), and he wanted to get a skin before they went back to England."

When reminded that it was not a bear, but the Dalton girls he was likely to meet before long, he answered, "Yes, yes, the Dalton girls, very pretty girls, second or forty-third cousins of my own, or something of that sort. And Ned, splendid fellow! that is to say, a splendid shot: for I don't think he is good for anything else. We can have some fun together in the direction of the Milk River Ridge, after the antelope. Don't sit up for me, Chrissie: it will be late before I'm back. Good-night, lass." Tom had Scotch blood in his veins, and "lass" was one of his pet words. He used it when something happened to please him; and just then the chance of perhaps seeing a bear suggested itself to him. Mrs. Tredennis called after him—

"Good-night, Tom, and take care of yourself."

Tom went over to MacMillan's house, where that worthy couple and the men had just finished supper. The redoubtable Billie, and Reynolds had gone that day to a neighbouring horse ranche, some forty miles east, to look after some stray horses, and would not be back that night; so only Dick Travers and Jack

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Holmes, known as "the Sage," were left behind. Tom entered the kitchen with a pleasant "good-evening," and sat down for a minute.

"I hardly like to ask you," he said, addressing Dick and the Sage, "as doubtless you've been hard at it all day; but I should like if one of you would do me a favour—you can lie off all day to-morrow. I've shot two blacktail on the edge of the bush up a coullee, about six miles from here, and if I don't get them home to-night, there's a chance that the wolves or even a bear may get away with them. Would one of you mind coming with me, and we'll put a pack-saddle on one of the horses and fetch them home; it's nearly full moon, and I know the coullee well?"

"I just want a good walk," said Dick, springing to his feet.

The Sage was on his feet the same instant. "I'm not going to be left out of this," he said, turning to Tredennis. "You see Dick here wants some one to look after him. He's young and giddy, and might get fooling with a bear if he met one—some fancied affinity or something of that sort, you sec—which might prove awkward."

"Come on, then," laughed their employer, "and look after your friend; the more the merrier."

They went out to the stable and put a pack-saddle on one of the quiet horses: and the Sage leading him, and Tom Tredennis shouldering his Winchester, and looking round for Dick to come up alongside,

they set out, and walked southwards down the Medicine-Iodge Coulee.

It was a lovely night. As they threaded their way down the valley, the sombre, pine-clad coulees were clearly defined, and had an air of profundity and grandeur that they hardly possessed in the day-time. The great, bare peak of Eagle-Butte towered aloft in solemn state, and seemed in the weird moonlight like some giant sentinel watching the western flank of these everlasting hills. The silence in these regions is profound enough in the day-time; but at night it lays one under a spell. So completely and deadly still does the world seem, that the watcher is fain to struggle with himself as with a nightmare, and cry out as if to free himself from its burden. It would seem as if he had suddenly been placed on the face of a dead planet; and even the sound of his own voice frightens him, it sounds so strange and unreal. But on this particular night there seemed to be an unusually large number of the birds of the night abroad; every now and again a ghostly grey shadow would sweep past them, and be lost in the gloom again. Then the short, harsh screech of some night hawk would be heard, and a peculiar deep whizzing note, as it dropped suddenly to earth, cutting the air with its razor-like wing.

"It's a glorious night," said Tom Tredennis, suddenly, "but I don't think I would care to live here always: in fact, not at all, if it were not for the

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sport. Fifteen or twenty years ago, when there was lots of big game in the country—buffalo by the thousand, and antelope in droves—it must have been very different.”

“Yes,” broke in the Sage, “I should fancy it must have been very different ; and then there was always the chance of a pleasurable little bit of excitement in the shape of getting your scalp-lock lifted by some frolicsome Blood Indian, or innocent Sioux. No, thank you, those so-called ‘good old days’ are all very well in the abstract. As Byron says, ‘All times when old are good :’ he seemed to understand those things.”

Tredennis laughed.

“There’s a good deal in what you say,” he remarked ; “but, as the Mounted Police can tell you, such a state of things is not beyond the bounds of possibility yet. You must understand, that from where we are now, you can travel south through an uninhabited country for scores and scores of miles. You can travel west to Bad Water Lake, the Paghogh-kee of the Indians, across the Milk River Ridge to the Sweet Grass Hills, and again towards the Bear Paw Mountains in Montana, and not meet with a solitary living thing—that is to say, a white man. In point of fact there are still prowling bands of Bloods or Siouxs in these broken lands, which, if they stumbled across you alone, would only too readily relieve you of your scalp-lock. There has

been more than one cow-boy laid up by the heels on this very same ranche through travelling alone ; and I don't think that a year passes without several head of cattle being killed by these wandering gentry. When I first came here I was very much amused by our friend, Billy, always carrying his revolver with him ; but I have changed since then, and I know I wouldn't do it myself. And, by the way, I shouldn't advise you fellows to do it, either : I can lend you revolvers."

And now they trudged on, down the dry sandy bed of the creek, and their conversation turned on sport. Travers, who in his wanderings in various back parts of the earth had always gratified, so far as it lay in his power, the instinctive love of sport in his British nature, began to forget the episode of the morning, and to whom he was speaking. Being a pleasant narrator, he related various strange experiences of his : from trailing cannibal blacks, wanted for murder, with the Black-trackers in Northern Queensland, to alligator-shooting in Ceylon.

"By Jove!" Tredennis remarked, you're a lucky dog. I often envy you rolling-stones who knock round, here to-day, and there to-morrow ; never staying long enough in one place to out-wear the novelty ; seeing all climes and people, and meeting with all sorts of adventures and experiences——"

"Je-rus-alem, Dick !" interrupted the Sage, at this

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point of Tredennis's dissertation, and stopping short with an anxious look upon his face, "there goes my only pair of suspenders. Have you got such a thing as a piece of string and a knife about you? You see, Mr. Tredennis," he remarked, pleasantly, as these requisite articles were handed to him, "this is just one of these pleasant little experiences you refer to; rather prosaic, but none the less of a momentous nature—as it happens I've only one pair, and don't possess a belt."

Dick laughed silently; he knew that the Sage, with all his philosophy, was not above resorting to a ruse like this, to express his dissent.

Tredennis recommended him to use a belt in future: it was the better thing to ride in, and continued—

"Now, so far as I am concerned myself, if Providence had not laid me under certain obligations, endowing me with certain monies when I was a helpless infant, and which I know if I lived to the age of Methuselah I could never earn for myself, I should have been a rolling-stone. When I have talked with fellows—gentlemen and scholars, who have had their wits sharpened, and their ideas widened by contact with their fellow-men on the Australian diggings, and the African diamond fields, I have become alive to the fact of how meagre and circumscribed are the lives of us stay-at-homes after all. Gaining information through the medium of

books, and profiting by it through experience, are two very different things. Hilloa, Travers! what's the matter?" Dick was limping alongside him. That gentleman laughed in a low and embarrassed way.

"I'm sorry," he said, "and I don't want to interrupt or delay you, especially when you are paying we poor rolling-stones such compliments; but I'm just about to profit by one of those little experiences you referred to. I am afraid the sole of my right boot is about to part company with the uppers. Hold on; don't do that."

Tredennis had unbuckled his leather hatband, which it is the custom to wear round that hat known as the "cow-boy," a species of broad-rimmed felt.

"You hold hard, and put your foot up on that rock," Tredennis said, "it is a question of ways and means," and in a trice he had encircled the refractory sole and uppers with it. Slipped his pocket-handkerchief through it, took a turn round Dick's ankle to hold it in position, and knotted it securely in front, as if it were the most matter of fact thing in the world.

"You see, Travers, I've been 'there before,'" he said easily. "When you go back to the ranche, MacMillan, who has a lot of boots in the store, will be able to fit you. In the meantime let's have a cigar, I've got some beauties here—prime Indians."

They lit up and went on again.

Then Travers let his comrade do the talking. All that morning a strange conflict of emotions had been

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warring within him. That bitter spirit of cynicism and distrust of human nature, and woman's nature in particular, which had for the last few years been warping his better nature, had found that morning a culmination, in his denunciation of the woman who had been the cause of this change in him. He had been brought up to a life of ease and indolence; which was not perhaps quite in accordance with one of his active temperament. But the life had its influence upon him, and had to a certain extent unfitted him for a worldly calling. He had been of a generous and impulsive nature, only valuing money for what it represented, and the good to which he was able to apply it. There was nothing that was sordid or mean in his composition; unlike many young men of his set he had realised the truth of the saying, that it was more blessed to give than to receive. Indeed, it had often been a matter of speculation among his friends, how that one who seemed to take life so easily, and was so fond of the good things of this life, could deny himself some pleasure, to gratify what they considered some quixotic idea of charity. Perhaps those who were most intimate with him, knew least about the many quiet and unobtrusive acts of goodness which sprung from a generous-hearted nature, and a mind that had more depth and forethought in it than is generally accredited to youth. When he suddenly lost his ample means, it was a hard blow for one in his position. But that part of

his nature which had lain dormant by the force of circumstances in him asserted itself, and he had jumped at the offer of a good appointment abroad, and the chance of resuscitating his worldly prospects. He had offered to release the girl he was engaged to from her engagement to him when the crash came; but she had said she would wait until he had made a home for her, in that distant land which he was going to. She was the only daughter of a deceased Indian officer, who, on his death, with characteristic improvidence, had left her depending on the charity of an uncle and aunt; who, with a large family of girls of their own, could not but look upon the beautiful but penniless girl as simply a piece of goods, that must be put upon the market as soon as possible. Travers had gone abroad, and by hard work and self-denial had obtained a position which was at least as good as one in his altered circumstances could reasonably expect. And then came her heartless treatment of him; no wonder such a sudden revulsion of feeling wrought a change in him. The house he had taken such pains to prepare for her, and every detail of which had been subservient to one idea—that of being pleasing to her—was now hateful in his sight. Perhaps there is a limit to all human endurance, and probably he did brood a little too much over his hard luck. Anyhow, he left the island of Ceylon behind him. He had wandered to various parts of the East Indies, the

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South Sea Islands, and New Zealand : engaging in all sorts of hazardous and unprofitable expeditions, and had lapsed from one stage of hard-upness to another. All the time getting more used to the life and feeling his change of position less. He had ceased to correspond with his friends, who doubtless would have helped him, if he had allowed them to ; but ambition was dead in him. The one guiding star of his life, which alone could have kept him in the beaten paths of respectability, and developed all that was good in him, had set. He had become what he now was, a man of no particular vices, but in whom that nomadic spirit, more or less latent in all our natures, was hurrying along on its aimless current. There had been a time when to think of this man—Tredennis—now walking beside him, had been to rouse an evil spirit within him. He had looked upon him as one who had stolen from him the one thing he had valued most in life. Then, in his calmer moments, when he came to consider that it was the woman, and not the man who was the transgressor. When he thought that one who had ruthlessly broken faith with him, and betrayed him, could not possibly keep it with one who was so much older, and whose tastes were so dissimilar to her's—whom, indeed, she had only married for the sake of position, curiously enough his sentiments had changed to almost that of pity. For, he considered, she must of necessity be false to this man in her heart. A remarkable chain

of circumstances had thrown Tredennis and him together ; and though at first he experienced a strange shrinking from him, still he felt there was a subtle bond of union between them. The little he had seen of this man was prepossessing ; for Tredennis, with all his tautology and brusqueness, was a gentleman, and one who was quick to recognise and respect that quality in others (no matter what their position) whom circumstances had thrown in his way. Already, with that sense of justice which neither worldly wrongs nor misfortunes can eradicate from the Anglo-Saxon nature, and which has blood for its ground-work, Dick Travers felt grateful to him, and felt drawn to the man whom he had often thought he must necessarily hate.

" Now, here we are at Stony Creek," said Tredennis, " another mile, and we are at the place where I shot the deer."

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CHAPTER V.

BRUIN AT BAY.

IT was a wildly irregular rent in the great pine-clad plateau or bench, that rose some thousand feet above the level of the valley. The rugged sides bristled with great pine trees, and the bed of the water-course—a roaring torrent in the spring, and a dry gravel bed in the fall—rose gradually between overhanging rocks, and great gloomy arches of rank and tangled undergrowth. Tredennis led the way in silence, his two companions following. The first named individual had put several explosive cartridges into the magazine of his Winchester ; for, as he had said, the coullee had always borne a name for the large cinnamon bear, which, a number of hunters classify with the dangerous grizzly. It was a ravine which it required much caution to ascend in the day-time, and even then, as Travers thought, if he wanted to look for bear, it should have been from some vantage ground in the rocks above, and not in the bed of the stream that he would have looked for them. And now in

the deceptive moonlight it was laborious travelling. It was up, up, up, in the mystic light and shadow. And now, the valley they had left behind them was lost in a thin, pale mist, and still that dark breach in front of them seemed to rise sheer up, and pierce right into the heart of the mountain. There was a slight moaning in the upper reaches amongst the pines, and it grew chilly. Travers in his thin, threadbare coat was shivering, and the Sage was strangely silent. The wild and eerie nature of their surroundings seemed to affect their spirits.

At last the ravine took a sudden turn, and they found themselves in a large, shallow and circular hollow, fringed with a dark, dense belt of pine trees.

"Now, stop here with the pack-horse," Tredennis whispered to Holmes. "I left the deer about a couple of hundred yards or so over there. You'd better not come Travers. I was a fool not to make you fetch a rifle with you. I generally think about a thing when it is too late." And he went stealthily up the creek bottom.

The little breath of air that stirred came right down the gully, so there was no fear of game scenting them should there be any in the vicinity. Dick could not resist the temptation of following close on Tredennis, in the shadow. Besides, he knew—having often stalked bear before—that this brute, though possessed of a cunning that is unsurpassed in the animal kingdom, will at times when it is engaged in grubbing up

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roots or in devouring its prey, neither appear to see nor hear the approach of an enemy, until that enemy is close upon it. So much so in fact have some hunters remarked this, that they have ventured to ascribe a peculiarity of vision to it, and to assert that it is the sense of smell on which the bear depends, to inform itself of the presence of an enemy. In reality the bear is quick to hear.

They crawled on about another hundred yards or so, and then the banks of the creek got so low that one could have looked over them. Tredennis raised himself cautiously, and looked over the bank. In another instant he ducked his head, and looked back at Dick. His face had paled slightly, and his eyes sparkled with suppressed excitement. Still he was as cool as a cucumber; it was evident to Dick, that this man at least was not troubled with "buckfever."

"Get back," he said "for goodness sake! There's a great big beggar not eighty yards off. He has collared one of the deer, and is carrying it away. As soon as you hear me fire get up a tree, or anywhere out of the road; they're dangerous when they're wounded. I'll crawl up out of this on to the bank, and try to get a bead on him."

"Then don't forget to aim low; in moonlight there's always a tendency to fire high—try behind the ear, or well behind the left shoulder if you can; and try to get a couple of shots in before he sees you. Good luck."

And Dick, who felt as much interest in the issue as Tredennis did himself, watched the latter crawl on all fours out of sight, and held his breath in suspense. The idea of taking to a tree never once entered his head.

It was a curious turn in the wheel of fate ; and if any one had told him a couple of days before, that in less than that time, he would be whispering such instructions into the ear of this one man above all others, he would have laughed with scornful incredulity. And now as he lay waiting for the sharp ping of this man's rifle, so undreamt-of and strange were the surroundings, such an air of unreality seemed to encompass them, and there had been such a crowding of unexpected events into the last twenty-four hours, that he almost expected to wake up any minute and to find that he had only been having a remarkably vivid dream.

Dick shivered in the chill moonlight. The slight breeze that whispered among the pines had a most uncanny sound. The moonlight was intense ; threw every object exposed to its glare into strong relief, and accentuated the shadows. These, again, assumed grotesque phantasmal shapes, and gave one the idea that they were the genii of the mountain, who were lurking there with sinister designs. A little bird awoke among the boughs overhead, and, under the impression that it had overslept itself, and that it was broad daylight, broke into a shrill treble of song.

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How sharply and coldly the stars away up there in the dark blue gleamed. How spectral and far-off the opposite bank of the coulee appeared to be. Was Tredennis never going to shoot? It seemed an age since he left. Dick, in spite of his instructions, crawled a few paces forwards and looked over the bank.

At first he could see nothing but the dark encircling fringe of pines, then he looked cautiously a little more to the right, and there he saw something that quickened his pulses and made him draw his breath a little more quickly. A huge dark shape, that seemed to have a hump over its shoulders and another upon its hindquarters, was busily engaged dragging a prostrate body along the ground. It did not seem to be in a hurry, but would occasionally relinquish its hold, and marching round its property would sniff all about with its nose close to the ground. Dick, saw that it was a huge cinnamon bear. He looked a little more to the right, and he could see another dark object crawling slowly and cautiously towards it. It was Tredennis, making sure of his game by trying to get as close to it as possible, without being seen. Dick, lost sight of him behind a fallen pine. It was deadly still now. Suddenly a stick cracked ominously behind that prostrate pine; the bear lifted its head, stood stock-still for an instant, and seemed to sniff the air.

Then a blaze of lurid light, a deafening report, and a thousand rattling, pealing echoes rolled down the

coulée, and broke the brooding stillness in a startling and hideous fashion. The bear ran a few steps forwards, and looked over its shoulder. If hit at all, it carried the bullet as only a bear can carry one. Another thundering report, and it dropped upon its knees. Dick, in spite of his instructions, ran towards Tredennis, who rose to his feet, and stepped over the fallen pine, at the same time pumping another cartridge into the barrel of his Winchester. The bear suddenly recovered itself, and facing about espied its enemy, ran a few paces towards him with remarkable swiftness, and then raised itself up on its hind legs.

Then some one gasped—"In the name of all that is merciful, what is the matter with Tredennis's rifle?"

With a horrible sinking at his heart, Dick, saw him trying to force the lever back into its place; but evidently the cartridge had got jammed in the carriage. These were terrible moments; the huge brute came towards him with great, ungainly strides—Tredennis moving slowly backwards before it. Dick shouted to attract the attention of the bear, but it only turned its head slightly, paused for a second, and advanced again. Horror of horrors, it would strike him down with one of its great lever-like paws in another second! Suddenly, the hunter shot headlong and backwards across the fallen pine, and his rifle flew from his hand.

Dick never could recollect clearly afterwards how

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he did it ; and though the whole incident could not have occupied more than a few seconds of time, it seemed to the principals in it to last for an eternity. To have recked of any danger, or to have delayed a second, would have been certain death for one or other of them. He sprang forward, caught up the rifle, gave the cartridge a sharp knock downwards with the side of his hand, released the cartridge, and closed the lever with his left hand. Without having time to take deliberate aim, he discharged its contents under the shoulder of the huge brute, in the neighbourhood of the heart. It tottered for a minute unsteadily upon its legs. What a wicked intelligence in these angry little eyes that glared in the moonlight ! To pump another cartridge up and fire again was the work of an instant, and the bear fell forwards heavily, an inert mass, only by a few inches missing Tredennis, who lay sprawling on his back.

"Guess," as our friends across the lines would say, "it was a 'tight fit,'" remarked Dick, as he sat down on the prostrate pine, and drew his hand across his forehead as if to clear his faculties ; at the same time watching with not a little amusement Tredennis disengage himself from the pine boughs, and scramble in consternation to his feet. He breathed freely now, and the encounter had seemed to dispel the air of unreality, that before had seemed to envelop everything. The excitement had done him good ; the

reaction from his former morbid state of mind had set in, and he felt a different man.

In another minute, Holmes, with a face that looked ghastly in the moonlight, and perched on the top of the pack-horse, cantered up. It was perilous ground to canter over; but it was the bear, and not the ground the Sage was thinking of just then. However, it was the other way about with the horse; but then the Sage could not be expected to provide for every contingency. What followed savoured of broad farce.

"Look out, Jack!" yelled Dick. But Jack was too late; for with that wild terror which all horses have of a bear, either alive or dead—even the slightest scent of one will suffice—the scared animal plunged violently. It reared up on its hind legs, and the Sage was hanging on by the mane. Again it recovered its perpendicular; but in another second, Holmes, was sent flying headlong right into the arms of Tredennis, and bowled that gentleman over like a nine-pin, back among the pine-boughs.

It was too much for Dick, who roared again at the ludicrous spectacle which the two presented, as they disentangled themselves, and rose ruefully to their feet.

"The deuce take you, man!" said Tredennis to the sorely surprised youth, and feeling himself all over, "You needn't fly into my arms like that. If you're beside yourself with joy over my recent deliverance you should learn to control your emotions. You've

squashed my cigar-case as flat as a pancake, not to speak of the damage you've done to my interior economy."

But he laughed good-naturedly at the same time, and seemed rather to have enjoyed the mishap than otherwise—at least, so far as it was possible to enjoy an accident of the kind.

"Really, sir, I'm exceedingly sorry——" began the Sage, but Tredennis cut him short. "Oh! nonsense, Holmes; a little variety entertainment of this nature is rather refreshing, after what was nearly turning out to be a tragedy. How's your poor head?"

This little incident served to distract the minds of the hunters from their late danger; and as Dick had caught the pack-horse again, and had taken it round to the windward side of the dead bear, they turned their attention to it.

But Tredennis had evidently something to say to Dick.

"I say, Travers," he said, "I don't suppose you like speechifying any more than I do; but I want you to know that I am sensible of what your pluck has done for me. I only hope that in the future you will reckon me as a friend, and not forget to call upon me as such, should you ever have occasion to. I don't think it's necessary to say anything more at present."

Tredennis resembled the sailor's parrot, in that if he did not say much, he thought a good deal,

"Pshaw!" said Dick, "you are over-rating this affair." He could not for the life of him see that he had done anything out of the common. "When you brought him down on his knees that time, you did all any man could be expected to do; you can blame your Winchester for the rest. Anyhow, one might bury a dozen of bullets in their fat and not hurt them. It was simply lucky that I should have had some experience with rifles. I knew I could fix it in a jiffey. But we must bleed this chap. I should say there is close on four hundred pounds of good beef-steak on his ribs anyhow."

It was a splendid specimen of the cinnamon bear. As they had no means of taking home the carcase, they decided to pack back the blacktail, and to come back next day with proper means of conveying it. And now, as a slight frost had set in, they lost no time in placing the blacktail on the back of the pack-horse; and in the best of spirits started out upon their homeward march.

CHAPTER VI.

"I DON'T THINK SHE'S HAPPY WITH HIM."

THE chill and wan-eyed morning came at last, scattering the furtive, mis-shapen shadows that lurked in sinister places, and causing the silvery frost to sparkle on the prairie. It was the first frost of the season, and Travers shivered in his old coat as he approached the ranche. They took the deer to a large underground cellar near the house, and hung them up. Jack Holmes was leading the horse off to the stable, and Dick was going with him, when Tredennis stopped him.

"Hold hard, Travers, you're not going away like that. You must come in and have a little Scotch medicine; you're chilled I can see. I say, Holmes, just shove that horse in the stable, and hurry up."

"I'd rather you'd excuse me," began Dick, "for though I'm as fond of a drink as the next man generally, still I don't feel like one now——"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Tredennis; "the occasion permits of no excuse: it would be contrary to all

precedent. What is more," he continued, perhaps partly divining the scruples of his *employé*, "there's no necessity to disturb any one. Come round this way."

To have refused under the circumstances, would have been to disappoint the good-natured fellow; and as he himself said, "would have been contrary to all precedent on such an auspicious occasion." He led the way round the front of the house; his unwilling guest feeling unaccountably ill at ease. But he felt more ill at ease in another minute, when they discovered a light burning in that room, which was unique among other rooms in the North-West in that it possessed a French window. Near the light, which was wan and strange in the more powerful daylight, and at a table, her head resting on one hand, and gazing as it were into space, sat a woman; and in her, Tredennis recognised his wife. He, however, betrayed no surprise; only an impatient ejaculation escaped him. So oblivious did the figure seem to everything around, and so immovable, that for a minute, Dick thought she must be asleep. A book, back upwards, lay alongside her.

"The idea!" Tredennis exclaimed, "she must have sat up all night. Who would have thought women were so silly. This way, Travers."

This individual had stood stock-still at the sight of the lonely figure; and now, with a rush, the returning flood of conflicting emotions that had so exercised

him the day before, and which, the excitement of the past night had for the time being caused him to forget, now once more took possession of him. But to have drawn back, would only have been to excite remark. Moreover, deliberate flight would not have been in accordance with that vantage ground of moral superiority and resolute impassiveness which he intended to adopt as his *rôle*, if by any chance she would be thrown in his way. They passed in by the front door, and were already well within the wide passage when, hearing them, she started up, and running to the door met them.

"Oh, Tom, I am so glad you are back——" she began; then the words died upon her lips. For a second there was a scared and strange look in her eyes as she met those of Dick's. But the latter only regarded her with the stoniest irrecognition that he could muster. Tredennis spoke.

"Why, Chrissie, you look as if you had been dreaming; what on earth possessed you to sit up all night? I have been out dozens of times before, and you didn't bother about me. But, my dear, here's some one I want to introduce you to; I told you about him before. My wife—Mr. Travers. Had it not been for Mr. Travers you would have been a full-fledged widow this morning, Chrissie; but I'll tell you all about it some other time; in the meantime we're perishing with cold."

"Mr. Tredennis will have it that I rendered him

some service," Dick said, bowing coldly, though courteously, as if he were addressing the veriest stranger; "but when he comes to think over it, he will find that it was nothing more than a very ordinary hunting incident indeed."

She had looked up into his face for a moment in a quick, pleased way—that way in which a woman can express her thoughts so much better than in words. But she checked herself in another second, and in a manner that unaccountably annoyed her husband, said simply:

"Then I hope you will not suffer from your night's experience, Mr. Travers. I am afraid my husband has been victimising you, but trust he will be sufficiently grateful, however, for what you have done. If you want any hot water, Tom, I'll fetch it from the kitchen. I thought you would be coming home cold and requiring some, so kept a fire up; one can't expect servants to do these things, no matter how willing they may be."

And she went off to return with a small brass kettle of steaming water, which she handed to him. Her manner was cool and collected enough by this time; and there was not the slightest trace of any embarrassment, which the presence of Travers might have occasioned her. Probably she overdid her part, for the very brusqueness of manner which she assumed, and the coolness with which she treated her husband's guest, were too pronounced not to be

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remarked by honest Tom, who looked bewildered, ran his hand through his hair, and almost committed himself by giving vent to his feelings in a low whistle. She could not hide the strained look in her eyes from Dick, however, who regarded her curiously. But in a few minutes the feelings of Tredennis were much relieved, and he had occasion to think that he must have magnified his wife's apparent discourtesy to his guest ; for Holmes, having got rid of his horse, and his subsequent behaviour changed the aspect of affairs. Unlike his companion, there was no reason why he should deny himself much-needed refreshment. So, hurrying round to the front of the house, to avoid if possible being behind time, he entered the porch, and was fingering the handle of the front door, when, suddenly recollecting that it was hardly the manner in which to enter the house of his employer, he paused. Just then the door opened, and a lady stood there who looked inquiringly at him. She evidently realised the situation, and at the sight of his puzzled gaze allowed a smile to dawn upon her face, and a low laugh to ripple from her lips. For a second the lively fancy of the Sage ran riot. Truly, he had a glimpse of a handsome, thoroughbred English girl ; and his thoughts ran back to some Belgravian drawing-room. Perhaps it was to see any lady at all—here, in the land of the Philistines—that took him so much aback.

"I beg your pardon, I think I have been rather precipitate; but I——" and the Sage, for at least once in his life, wandered off into the unhappy hunting grounds of obscure speech. But Mrs. Tredennis came to his relief.

"Oh, come in, Mr. Holmes; for I know who you are. You must think me very rude; but I've a vagrant sort of fancy, and your appearance brought a very amusing incident to my recollection."

"Savouring of vagrancy, I should say," suggested the Sage, now somewhat reassured, "and suggestive of the cloaks and umbrellas—Yes, that did dawn upon me, and no doubt lent a certain appearance of guilt to a not exactly respectable exterior."

"Well, anyhow, appearances were against you," she admitted laughingly.

She had not, as in the case of his companion, scanned in a second, and noted the threadbare appearance of his *tout ensemble*. But she had recognised intuitively that she was speaking to one who was her equal by birth; and perhaps she could not have done otherwise, under the circumstances, than have placed him upon an equal footing, and dispensed with conventionality.

In the adjoining room, Tredennis had paused in the act of warming a couple of glasses, when he heard their voices in the passage, and involuntarily looked at Dick, with just a trace of anxiety on his face; for he had been annoyed and unable to

account for his wife's reception of Travers. But now he was relieved that she at least welcomed "the other one" as he termed Holmes. He had just come to the conclusion, that it was because he had not made enough fuss about her having sat up all night for him, and that to retaliate she had shown her disapproval of his early entertainment of guests—poor Tom! In his satisfaction he shouted out loud enough for them to hear—

"Now then, Holmes, that isn't right you know—taking advantage of my being engaged. You've either got to come and take your medicine, or stay where you are and do without."

"Then I'll do without, if you have no objections," answered the Sage, promptly, and looking at Mrs. Tredennis, who smiling, paused as if to listen.

"That is just where the shoe pinches," Tredennis called back. "I have very strong objections; your presence is urgently required here." And there was a mock entreaty in his voice.

"Much he cares, anyhow!" sprang to the lips of Mrs. Tredennis: and although these words were evidently intended to be taken in jest, they ill accorded with the expression on her face just then. It was evident that she regretted the speech; for with but a sorry attempt at a smile she said—

"Perhaps after all, Mr. Holmes, you'd better go. I am obliged to you for the compliment you have paid me. Perhaps we will try you some other time,

when the exigencies of the case don't call for such an exercise of self-denial. Good-morning."

She bowed smilingly and passed into the next room.

As the Sage watched her pass, a quiet, dry smile dwelt upon his face for an instant. But he took care to alter its expression as he entered the gun-room, where he was welcomed cheerily by Tredennis.

When Dick, and Holmes passed out of the house and made their way to MacMillan's, the former, as was his wont, was silent and pre-occupied; but the Sage was evidently turning over something in his mind. Dick looked at him inquiringly, and the Sage immediately began to talk. Probably the former, with his knowledge of the world, and the Sage in particular, had in his mind a certain little psychological dissertation which the youth had treated him to a couple of days before, and was now playing a part from contradictory motives.

"By Jove, Dick, is she not a surprise?" said the youthful admirer of the fair sex. "You might have knocked me down with a feather, as they say, when I saw her. She is one of the best looking women I've seen on this continent: or any other for the matter of that!"

"I suppose you allude to Mrs. Tredennis?" Dick queried, wearily.

"Why, of course, who else could I mean? I never met such a chap as you, Dick. I don't believe there

ever has been a woman, or ever will be one, who will arouse in you the faintest suspicion of passing interest."

"You think so?" was the absent rejoinder.

"You've just proved it!" promptly returned the Sage. "Why, man, she would charm the heart of a stone. She's as lively as a girl of sixteen; I could hardly believe at first that she was a married woman, and married to such an old sober-sides as Tredennis. But I can't quite understand——" and here the Sage broke off shortly, knit his brows, looked serious for a minute, and continued a little more slowly—

"There's a something about her, though, I don't quite understand. I say, Dick,"—and at this point he came to a dead stop and looked his companion gravely in the face—"I don't think she's happy with him. She said something to me in the hall that will only bear one construction—she came out with it in an unguarded moment, and only confirmed my suspicions by trying to patch it up."

"Pshaw, man, you're trying to work up a romance, and make a mountain out of a molehill!"

"No, Dick, by the father of the cock that crew to Peter, I am not!" was the deliberate reply. "Because your heart's like a stone, or because you've parted with it to a barmaid, or some girl in a tobacconist's shop, long ago, and you're a few paltry years older than I am, you think you know better. But with all due deference to your grey hairs, I believe I under-

stand women better than you. I'm afraid there's a screw loose somewhere in that marriage. That woman has made a mistake, and is finding it out. Tredennis is one of those real good fellows, as they call them; but I don't think he's the sort of man to please a woman like her. She is one of those women who have a natural hankering after sympathy; and she doesn't get any from him. I wish I were in his shoes."

"The greatest mistake of all," began Dick, in a dry, pedantic tone, "'is when a chap gets spooney on another man's wife.' Jack," he said, with a mock seriousness in his voice, "I believe you're one of those philosophers who don't always practise what they preach. You'd better take care lest it turn out to be a case of 'physician, cure thyself.'"

And still the worldly-wise words of the callow youth, had no particular significance in Dick's own eyes just then. He thought that safety lay in the future, by reason of his experience in the past. But this is a common mistake—holding the future cheaply.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ROUND-UP.

THE round-up was in full swing. To Dick Travers, a round-up was nothing new, but to Jack Holmes, it was very much so indeed. In fact, in some parts of the country, more especially across the International Boundary line, he would have had, as some of "the boys" expressed it, a rather "tough time" of it, on account of his verdancy. But those who composed this particular "round-up" were mostly a few of the neighbouring ranchers themselves, whose runs lay away to the north, and a few hired hands. The latter were mostly of a nondescript type, and had a very pronounced tendency to fringed chaperegos, great jangling Mexican spurs, fancy revolvers, and practical jokes. But they were, generally speaking, of a good-natured and accommodating type, and had nothing particularly bad in their compositions. But to have ascribed these virtues openly to them, would have been to have mortally insulted them. In point of fact, when any subtle flatterer meant to pay them

a compliment, he insinuated that they were "wild and woolly," and if there was a point to be gained by so doing, it was as good as won. Perhaps, there has been no hero of modern fiction more misrepresented than the genuine cow-boy. To the average reader of the sixpenny novel, he is a species of walking arsenal and circus-rider knocked into one; who rides his horse into bar-rooms and over bars; who shoots on the slightest provocation, and whose aim is so miraculous that at sixty yards he can shoot the eye right out of a mosquito, if he happens to see one winking at him. Now with strict regard to the truth, he is a law-abiding citizen enough; and when not out for a holiday, is a painstaking, steady, and inoffensive individual; often an apt student of Nature, and a reader when he gets the chance. It is your sham, nondescript, outside article, who has neither partiality nor aptitude for a cow-boy's work, but who under cover of an honest calling, makes it an excuse for a nomadic, shiftless life, a little card-sharping, and a little horse-stealing: who has usurped a place in fiction that his betters should occupy.

After all, a cow-boy's life exercises a spell, which—whether it is on the prairies and pampas of the west, the foot-hills of the Rockies, or on the great cattle runs of the Australian bush—when once acquired, can never be shaken off. There is a poem called "The Sick Stockrider," by Adam Lindsay Gordon, the Australian poet—an Englishman by birth, however—

that has haunted at least one life in these varied climes. Here is a verse or two of it:—

" 'Twas merry in the glowing morn among the gleaming grass,
To wander as we've wandered many a mile,
And blow the cool tobacco cloud, and watch the white wreaths
pass,
Sitting loosely in the saddle all the while.

" 'Twas merry in the backwoods, when we 'spied the station roofs,
To wheel the wild scrub cattle at the yard,
With a running fire of stockwhips and a fiery run of hoofs;
Oh! the hardest day was never then too hard!"

This passion for a wandering open-air existence, the free untrammelled life of the bush, the prairie, or the mountain-side, is at once the soul and the bane of one's existence. There is, of course, pleasure—such as it is—in the accumulation of riches. But at the close of life, whether is it better to say with the man whose soul has not been bartered away for the gold "that satisfieth not," and who has lived a clean life: "I have seen God's own world, and know how beautiful it is. I have lived every hour of my life, and can thank Him with a full heart for it"; or with the man who has heaped up treasures in vain: "If I had sought knowledge as I have sought gold, then would I not now be groping in darkness"?

But why ask?

The round-up party consisted of about twenty hands all told. Every day the cook's waggon would make a stage of from eight to ten miles, and these

stages marked the camps. In the morning the party would start out in different directions, to meet later on at one given point, driving the cattle with them that they had picked up on the way, and which had strayed away during the summer. The weather was exhilarating, and the spirits of the men good. Tredennis, who had suddenly become possessed of an idea to render himself generally useful, enjoyed the fun as much as any one; and after the day's work was done, could spin a yarn with the best of them round the camp fire. As if Nature had compensated him for his lack of experience and frequent blunders during the day, "the Sage," Jack Holmes, resolved himself into a bright and shining light in the evening; and as he could sing a capital song, and had an inexhaustible fund of anecdote, he furthermore retrieved the character he had won for being generally useless. In one point at least he had shown his wisdom, and that was in the capability of taking a joke good-naturedly at his own expense. The first morning they were out, when the cow-boys and breeds were doing a little "showing off," lassoing one another when in full gallop, throwing their hats on the ground and picking them up, and indulging in various other pleasantries peculiar to cow-boys, Billie made a dead set at Holmes. Billie had been watching the Sage cantering past on a rather spirited broncho—he was at least an irreproachable rider—when suddenly, the former divining that his chance for

distinguishing himself had now come, swung his rope round his head, and whiz it went through the air, the noose settling down over the unsuspecting Sage's shoulders, and tightening round his waist. In another second there was a riderless horse, and the rider sat down violently on the bare ground. However, he laughed along with the rest of them, although he felt in anything but a laughing humour, and took with good grace Billie's delicate hint that "Tender-foots had to larn."

But the words were hardly out of Billie's mouth when a most unlooked-for accident occurred. A quick, experienced hand, unobserved, placed a piece of cactus somewhere in the neighbourhood of the "flap" broncho's tail that Billie was riding, when—whiz—bang—bump—bump—bump! and Billie's broncho seemed to have gone mad, and bucked like one possessed. Its head was between its legs. Its back was arched like a rainbow, and every buck was higher than another. Perhaps Billie was taken by surprise, or perhaps the broncho was surprised—however, it is more than likely that both were; and as the broncho could not get rid of the cactus, it got rid of Billie, who, although a splendid rider, dismounted in rather an undignified fashion. Perhaps of the two falls, Billie's was the least dignified. When the latter gentleman discovered that no bones were broken, he slowly raised himself from the ground, and glaring round in an ugly fashion (he somehow could not enter



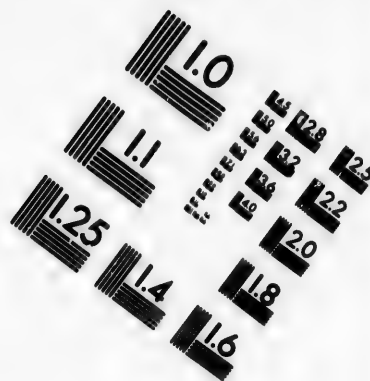
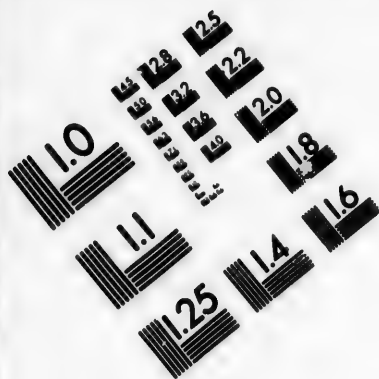
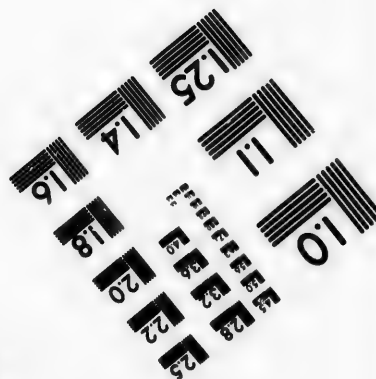
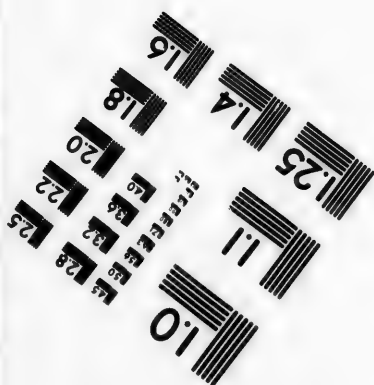
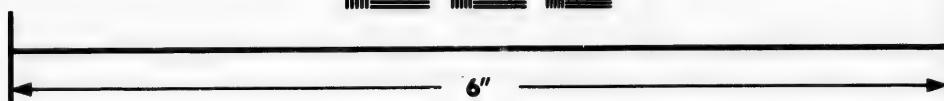
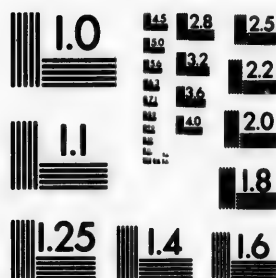


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into the spirit of the joke) finally fixed his gaze upon Dick Travers, and inquired in a threatening manner—

“Who the (plutonic) done that?”

Dick spoke as he came towards him with a friendly show of assisting him to get up, and with a smile that was of a most comprehensive character.

“I did, my hearty; and didn't I do it well? You see, as a ‘tender-foot’ I'm doing my best to follow your advice and ‘larn.’”

What Billie muttered was drowned in the roars of laughter that went up from the crowd. However, he treated with undignified silence the hope Dick expressed, to the effect that he was not hurt; and his mount having been caught by the Sage in the meantime, he mounted it sullenly, and in a few minutes more the crowd dispersed.

Away they went along the brown hill-sides, where the prairie chickens strutted about in the warm sunshine; over the high, breezy benches, where they drank in the pure, bracing ozone, and all the surrounding country lay like a great coloured map ahead and around them. There, showing dimly away to the south was the purpling outline of the Bear-Paw Mountains in Montana; away to the south-west, were the three conical peaks of the Sweet Grass Hills; and, like pieces of broken mirror on a shadow-flecked field of grey and green, were Wild Horse Lake and Pagh-ogh-kee. Then, down again into the great grassy coulees and the stony, dried-up creeks. Now,

under great, brown, threatening cut-banks, that spoke of a time when these rugged channels ran high and swiftly with a raging, tawny-crested flood. And now again, they rode alongside a beaver-haunted, still, deep pool, fringed and half-hidden by a greenery of wolf-willow and silver-birch. And then, perhaps, when they wondered where the cattle could possibly have got to—the signs of whose presence were all around—under a group of shady, rugged maples or cotton-wood trees they would sight a group of wondering cattle, which would stand and gaze at them an instant with a mild but startled air, and then with tails raised high in the air, and a snort of fear, would stampede away through beds of crackling reeds, and stunted undergrowth. Then for an exciting gallop to head them off, and steady them down, over butte and coulee, over flint-strewn water-courses that rang again with the clattering din of hoofs, and over banks of waving sage-brush, with one eye to the unsteady band of cattle, and another to the treacherous badger-hole. But the broncho of the prairie is not like its brother born in the stable; for should by chance it stumble over a series of those treacherous man-traps, it will recover itself in an instant, and seldom comes to grief, whereas, the other is almost certain to break its neck. Then the excitement of the "cutting out," and the roping; the handling of the red-hot and hissing branding irons, and the exhibitions of much skill.

One loses sight of the dust, the heat, and the general discomfort of such occasions, and only remembers the zest one had in life in those days, and the merry jests. Then when the day's work is done, and all are lying smoking round the camp-fire, the "tall" yarns and jokes, that sound quaint and fresher than the wildest stretches of fiction ; and then the sweeter rest, for sweet is the sleep of the wearied. Than the dark blue heavens above, lit up by millions of gleaming stars, what grander canopy could a king have ?

There is a couple of verses from a poem, which is not by Tennyson, and runs thus :—

" O happy, happy days when we tied our shoes with string,
And braced our figures slender,
With one green-hide suspender ;
And laughed like anything.
O happy, happy days when we tied our shoes with string !

" We rose up in the morning with lyrics on our lips.
We hadn't any money ;
But what we said was funny,
And full of quaintest quips.
We rose up in the morning with lyrics on our lips."

After all, it is in the commonplace that pathos lies. Prosperity may furnish vales of Arcady in which nightingales sing, and where swains and love-sick maidens trip it to the time-honoured piping of oaten reeds, and the quaint conceits of the pastoral ; but the truer poetry of existence derives its pathos from retrospection, and ruined lives.

"You've caught the prairie-fever," said Dick Travers to Jack Holmes, when they had been out for a few days.

"So mote it be," commented the Sage. "Sorry I didn't catch it sooner."

"I sometimes wish," Dick went on musingly, "that I had been a Red Indian and lived in the old days when the prairies were covered with buffalo, and one had nothing to do but knock round, and fight, or hunt. I believe I could have found existence very bearable. One thing is certain, I would not have found quite so much to sicken me in life as I have done."

"Pshaw, man!" interrupted Tredennis, who was riding alongside them, and had overheard Dick's unwonted speech, "to hear you talk one would imagine that you had been badly crossed in love, or something of that sort. I once read of a chap in a poem called 'Locksley Hall,' who twaddled on just like you, till he came to his senses. At the same time I wouldn't mind going back ten years of my life—I think if I had my choice as to my future life, were the going-back part of it accomplished, I'd take my Winchester and a supply of cartridges, and lead a wandering life on these prairies, in preference to the course I have taken. By Jove, look at that band of antelope disappearing over the ridge yonder!"

Dick looked up suddenly, and regarded him for a moment with a startled expression on his face—he

did not even look at the band of antelope disappearing over the ridge. This, then, was the state of mind of the man who had supplanted him in that, the loss of which had made it seem to him, as if life were hardly worth living: who had been the cause of all the trouble. If she could only know the sentiments of this man—and he had more than a suspicion that she did know it—would she not realise that this was a sort of Nemesis upon her for the treacherous part she had played? After all, there were great retributive laws at work in all human affairs.

Tredennis watched the antelope disappear with wistful eyes, and continued the conversation.

"I'll tell you what we'll do, Travers; after the round-up is over, and before the winter sets in, we'll organise a hunting-party. My cousin Ned, is coming out—he's a capital shot—and a couple of girls are coming to pay us a visit; I believe they're at the ranche by this time, and I was wondering how we should amuse them. Now I've just hit upon it. We will take a couple of waggons, tents, and other necessary paraphernalia, and go right into the wilderness and sojourn for a while in that land where no man lives, and have a high old time. We can shoot and hunt to our heart's content, perhaps run across a bear in Many Berries Creek. I know where there is a piece of queer scenery down there: those red and white terraces and pillars of clay, that would interest Mrs. Tredennis—they are weird and dismal-looking

enough to suit her out-of-the-way choice of subjects. It will be late enough in the season, and cold enough at nights, but it will be a glorious trip."

"Holmes, is the very man you want for a thing of the kind," said Dick, hurriedly; "but if you go, I would rather you left me at the ranche with Mac-Millan; he can ill afford to lose one of his hands before the winter sets in, far less two."

"Nonsense, man! I've got to have a couple of men with me, anyhow; and I'll bring Briggs along, who is an excellent cook. We can do all the other work—what little there is of it—equally amongst us. I don't care about taking Billie with us: he's apt to forget himself before ladies, and his conversation is not edifying. In a party such as I propose, of course, it will be pic-nicing pure and simple. Besides, there will be two good-looking girls to look after; and you may understand the nature of the duty that will be expected of you," and Tom, smiled knowingly.

Dick did not somehow like the idea; but he made no further demur. He felt grateful to the man who so delicately led him to understand, that it was not as a hired servant simply that he looked upon him, but as a guest and an equal.

Holmes could hardly restrain his delight at the prospect of such a trip, and declared that to drive a waggon, and to render himself generally useful on such an expedition, would be a positive pleasure.

On the fifth day out, a remarkable phenomenon

began to assert itself. About noon, a thin, bluish mist came slowly drifting along from the west ; at first so shadowy and immaterial it was hardly noticed ; but before night distant objects could only be seen dimly through it ; and the three peaks of the Sweet Grass Hills, were hidden from view.

" A prairie fire, by all that is unlucky ! " said MacMillan.

Ere bed-time a strange thing was visible ; which, of course, to those who had been for any length of time in the country, was nothing strange. Long after sunset there was a blood-red glow in the sky which seemed to flicker portentously : now, suddenly spreading and growing vividly lurid ; then, gradually dying away again, until some wandering gust of wind fanned it into a greater glare than ever.

The ranchers watched the reflection in the sky with growing anxiety.

" It's thirty miles off, if it's a foot," said MacMillan, " and it has to cross the Milk River Ridge, not to mention a dozen of other obstacles ; so if the wind keeps down it's all right ; but if the wind comes on to blow from the west, we'll have to get a rustle on. The grass is as dry as flax, and will go just as quickly."

Next day the smoke was denser than on the day preceding, and the party became anxious. In the morning, MacMillan went out in the direction of the fire ; and by mid-day he was back again with a jaded horse. He called Tredennis aside.

"It's nearer than I thought, sir," he said; "we'll have to quit the round-up and fight the fire. The best thing we can do is to stop it—that's to say if we can—between the Milk River Ridge and Bad Water Lake, and north again from that. It's not for me to remind you," he continued, rather ruefully, "that your hay near the ranche is insufficiently protected, and that if the fire once crossed Big Plume Creek, I wouldn't answer for the buildings and the timber. That strip should have been burned along the creek, even if it spoiled the look of the place for a while. I'm afraid there's a risk of a much bigger strip being burned. I should advise you to send some one right away to do it, and look after the place, in case the fire gets away from us. Your man, Briggs, can give whoever you send a hand."

"By Jove, MacMillan, I believe you're right. It was Mrs. Tredennis who stopped the burning of that fire-break. This comes of letting women interfere," he muttered, irritably.

A council of war was held, and it was decided hastily that they should ride westward; fight the fire between given points, and endeavour to save the country. Tredennis, approached Dick.

"Travers," he said, "I want you to go right back to the ranche: it's a good thirty-mile ride, and it's late in the afternoon; but I know if any one can get there in time it is you. You know what has to be done: turn out Briggs and burn a fire-break along

the creek. MacMillan says if the fire gets across the creek, it will jump the breaks round the stacks in the Medicine Lodge Coulee for a certainty. Don't spare your horse. By Gad, the wind's getting up, as I'm a living sinner !"

Tredennis did not stop to hear what Travers had to say, but galloped away after the crowd of horsemen that cantered off towards the west to out-manceuvre the angry element. Travers roused himself, strapped his old coat in front of him on the saddle, and, turning his horse's head northward, gave it its head.

"It is fate, or my usual luck," he muttered moodily. "Of all men he must send me to that woman, whom I ought to hate, for the evil she has wrought me ; but for whom yet there is some of the old pain that is not quite dead. I am miserable when I am near her ; and yet I have not the moral courage to get out of this. I am a coward if ever there was one ; otherwise I would not be here. I told her she was nothing to me, but I lied. I wonder if hell holds many such hearts as mine ?"

Already, he was living in that uncertain future.

CHAPTER VIII.

AGAINST TIME AND FIRE.

DICK looked around: in the thin smoke he smelt fire, and noticed that little cindrous particles were falling round him, like the first few flakes of snow that herald a blizzard. Only these tiny specks were grey, or of an ominous blackness.

Ss-sh! and a light breeze began to hurry the little black specks along faster and faster, and to fan his cheek. For the time being, it brought him to a more reasonable frame of mind.

"It's going to blow a hurricane," he said, as if to himself. "It's fetching the fire with it, and the smoke is growing denser to the north. MacMillan said the fire had to cross the Milk River Ridge; but he did not reckon upon another one travelling up from the west; and that's what it is. I suppose it's a race between me and the fire. Now then, Barney, show me what mettle a broncho is made of."

The grass that year had been luxuriant and rank all spring and summer, and the fall had been scorch-

ing and dry ; and now the whole country was as dry as a piece of timber, and as inflammable as gunpowder.

For two hundred miles and more there was nothing but a vast unbroken ocean of prairie, and little to check the force of the great destroying element ; which, gathering strength and velocity as it came, created a whirlwind in its wake. The first signs of its approach were vast, pillar-like clouds of smoke, that rolled up from the horizon, and darkened the face of the sun as with a pall. The wild animals fled in terror before it ; and birds of prey hovered on its extreme edge reaping a bloody harvest.

And now with an ominous sighing the wind freshened, and far off—it might be twenty miles and more—it gradually assumed the sound as of the distant ocean beating upon a rocky coast.

Some people talk of the silence that usually accompanies elemental disturbances on the prairie ; but the law of association has a good deal to do with this supposition. Listen intently, and you will become conscious of a muffled roaring in your ears. If there are no obstacles to create distinctive noises, the elements cannot be silent any more than the combustion of gases in the atmosphere can fail to produce thunder.

Away to the north a gushet-like wedge of flame travelled with appalling rapidity, right in the direction in which Dick was travelling. He knew that so far as his own personal safety was concerned there was no particular danger ; for he could, if he saw fit, set

fire to the grass on the lee side of him ; then stand safely on the burnt patch, until the great front of sweeping flame had passed on either side. Or else he could choose a spot where the grass was shorter than usual, and gallop his horse right through the flames ; he had done this before on the pampas of the South. But he was haunted by the thought that he would not be in time to save the ranche ; that the flames would be there before him, and have done their work of destruction.

And now he pressed his fresh horse, Barney, which he had taken, and away it flew over butte and coulee. How its feet clattered over the flint-strewn ranges and stony water-courses ; how it gathered itself together and leapt the yawning wash-outs alongside the creek ; how it went for the steep hill-sides, and tore down them again like a thing possessed ! A stumble over some treacherous badger-hole and it were a wicked fall—a man's neck were not worth the purchase then. Neck against leather, truly. But if a man does get his neck broken he never knows it : and after all a man can only die once. And what is death ? A stumble—a shock—the cervical vertibræ is severed in the twinkling of an eye : the body is clay, and the mind is nothingness. And then the fire comes up and burns him to a cinder, and there is no more about him. He has only anticipated Nature.

“Stay with it, Barney, my boy !”

My God, how dark it grows !—and the smoke.

Phew! it is a choking, blinding, hellish smoke! There is a roar in one's ears; a fitting description of which can only be found in the Scriptures: "A noise like the roaring of a mighty wind."

And now, there is a blood-red, blinding, scorching glow right ahead of him: he is in a coullee of long, dry grass and reeds—a veritable funeral pyre; and the fire has travelled down it at the speed of a race-horse. Strain every nerve and muscle as you will, Barney, you are no match for it! He could not stop his horse now if he tried, far less turn it; a stumble, and it would be all up with him. There is a roar in his ears as of hell broken loose. It puts Dick in mind of a time when he was nearly drowned, and the waters thundered in his ears. His horse plunges madly and becomes demoralised. But only for a second—a cool, steady hand is pressed against the foam-flecked neck, and a couple of as firm, urging heels are pressed well into his flanks. Like a bolt from a cross-bow, Barney springs forward.

"Ss-ssh!" A great tongue of flame shoots up right alongside and wraps him in its fiery folds. His eyebrows frizzle and singe. He is being burnt alive, and is stifling; Oh, Barney, Barney!"

What! will he perish like a wild animal that has been caught in a trap? "Stay with it, Barney! Go it, Barney! Through it, my boy!"

A clattering of hoofs like "the devil beating with iron sticks on a kettledrum of granite!" A sobbing

gasp for breath—a horrible gulp of smoke—a fiery embrace of scorching flame—another leap—a blind, headlong charge at the opposite hillside, and the burning valley is cleared—a veritable Valley of the Shadow of Death.

A gust of cool, fresh air. "Hurrah! Barney, my boy. There's nothing like a touch of the devil in man or beast after all; and a wise Providence helps those who help themselves!"

And now the blackness of night unfolds a wonderful sight; and for a minute or two, Travers checks his horse when the brow of the valley is gained, and looks upon the terrible magnificence, and awe-inspiring grandeur of the scene.

It is as if a Babylon, undreamt of in immensity, were mapped out beneath him in lines of living fire. For at different levels on the heights and in the hollows of the burning prairie, terrace upon terrace of glowing flames and twinkling lights of every conceivable shape and colour, travel and dance grotesquely. It is Babylon in flames. When that bloody monstrosity, Nero, caused a great city to be burned, in order that he might enjoy the spectacle of a miniature hell, behind his ghoulish proclivities there must have lurked a hankering after the picturesque somewhere.

Now, it is an ocean with billows of glowing fire, that roll onwards and onwards, recede, cross, and re-cross, flicker, and die away again; but which with a horrible perversity break out and flare up again, and

are always coming nearer and nearer. Oh, these fiery crested billows! Oh, these relentless flames! It is like a burning world. It is like the realisation of that day which the ancients depict: when "the world will be wrapped in flames, and the element melt with fervent heat."

And now Dick goes cautiously down the steep, stony hill-side; ten miles more, and he will be at the ranche. He notices now that the Piegan Creek has headed the fire off away to the north-west, and he yet may be in time to burn a fire-break in the neighbourhood of Big Plume Coulee.

"Now then, Barney, my boy, for another canter. You will earn a good rest on the morrow, if you get there in time."

How cool and fresh the air is, and a dew is surely falling that will somewhat deaden the flames. Is not that long line of twinkling lights that wave-like lick lazily along, and which show interminably through the night, somewhat like the lights of the Thames Embankment as seen from the Surrey side of old Father Thames?

And it required no great stretch of imagination for Dick, to clothe his surroundings with scenes like these.

"Five miles more, Barney—three—two—easy, my lad; you have well been called 'man's noblest friend'; and well you knew—and let sycophants sneer—that in your broncho pluck rested only a matter of

life or death this never-to-be-forgotten night. One
 mile at the most—steady, my pet—how your poor
 sides quiver and shake!—steady, Barney!—steady!”
 There at last! Thank God!

CHAPTER IX.

"CURSE HER FOR HER HEARTLESSNESS!"

WHEN Dick arrived at the ranche, he could see no one about but the manager's wife. She ran out to meet him, to ask with a practical turn of mind as to whether the round-up had succeeded in driving off the herd to a place of safety, and if he thought there was time to save the pasture immediately round the ranche.

"The cattle are all right, Mrs. MacMillan;" said Dick, "but would you be kind enough to send Briggs to me, and get me two old broom-sticks and a couple of sacks. I think we'll be able to head it off down by the creek. Where is Mrs. Tredennis?"

"Oh, she and the young ladies and the master's cousin have gone up to the knoll to have a look round them. I don't believe they care a fig," continued Mrs. MacMillan, with some asperity, "as to whether the place is burned down or not. But here's Briggs."

Briggs was an Englishman, and was ready and eager to be instructed in the somewhat arduous work

of fighting prairie-fire. After putting his horse in the stable, Travers, and he, fixing the sacks at the end of the brooms, and wetting them in the creek, set off for the fire.

By this time the wind had gone down; the dew was falling, and the flames were crawling sluggishly and sleepily along. They went off for a couple of miles or so to the north, and beginning at the creek, beat out the fire at the rate of a slow walk. Dick was somewhat tired, but Briggs was as fresh as a young giant, and laid about him as if he were annihilating a mob of his enemies, instead of simply beating out what was only a feeble flame.

One hour—two hours, and Dick was growing weary. They had wetted their sacks half a dozen times or so at the creek, and were nearly abreast of the ranche; if they worked steadily for an hour or so they would be able to save all the country to the east of it. Even as yet the danger was not altogether past. As they toiled, the sweat running from every pore in their bodies, Dick heard voices coming from out the gloom to the east of him, and looking in that direction, he saw the figures of a man and woman coming towards him. The man had a long stick over one shoulder, and was carrying a pitcher; the woman carried a basket; Dick became strangely disturbed.

"For mercy's sake, keep away, Mrs. Tredennis!" he cried, "your dress may catch fire any minute.

You don't know what a danger you're running by coming here. Anyhow," he added bitterly, "you can't do any good now. We have done the most that can be done ; as long as the wind keeps down the ranche is all right."

It was indeed the rancher's wife, who, of all others in the world, perhaps, he least wanted to see just then, or at any other time.

"My dress cannot catch fire, Mr. Travers," she said, quietly ; "I was out when you came back, and knowing you had nothing to eat since you left the round-up, and that you would not take time to attend to yourself at the ranche, I brought you something out here. This is Tom's cousin, Mr. Terry." She introduced the gentleman who stood beside her, and continued : "Now Ned, you've got to take Mr. Travers' place, and he will take some of this cold coffee and a sandwich. You can't work, you know, unless you make yourself fit for it"—she had noticed the look of dissent upon his face by the flickering light of the fire. Cousin Ned, in the meantime, was smiling pleasantly at Dick, and insisted on shaking hands with him, despite of the latter exhibiting a hand, by way of warning, that resembled a gentleman's of colour. But Mr. Terry explained that as his own would be in a like condition in a few minutes it did not matter. He said—

"You'd better have a snack, Mr. Travers. I'll take your place ; 'pon my word, you know, I've just

been dying for some violent exercise." And putting down the pitcher on the unburnt grass, and rolling up his dainty shirt sleeves—for he was minus a coat—he took his fire-beating apparatus and started in as Briggs had done, to fight fire, as if he were St. George, and the fire were a dragon; and in a way which bid fair to play him out in a very short space of time, if he kept it up.

The light from the advancing chain of fire had somewhat quickened again, and by its light they could see each other's faces distinctly. She stood quietly regarding Dick for a minute with a strange, questioning look in her eyes; and then, as if the practical necessities of the case had overcome any other considerations, she said quietly, with just a shade of diffidence in her voice—

"Won't you have something to eat or drink? You must be nearly worn out by this time."

He felt as if he could have ignored her altogether, but his instincts as a gentleman forbade him to. He was nothing to her now; and why should she, who had so signally shown it, cruelly remind him of the past, and the difference between them in the present, by her presence there? Why should she now trouble about such a small thing as his temporal comfort? He said to himself it was characteristic of her after all—she liked to play the Lady Bountiful. It was easy for any one to be unselfish and self-denying in small things, but when it came to a large and life-long

interest being at stake, it was quite a different matter. And she had not scrupled to sacrifice her own and other people's feelings to gain a sordid end. Perhaps her conscience troubled her not a little regarding him, and being, to a certain extent, a creature of kindly impulses, and one of those who cannot bear to think that any one should think harshly of them, she took this non-committal way of showing her contrition and making amends. In spite of that old longing for her, which he could not wholly eliminate from his being, he experienced something akin to contempt for her.

"I would rather you had not thought about me at all," he said, "though I am sure Briggs will be glad to see these things. Can't you understand how I feel about it?"

For a minute there was a pained and startled look on her face, and he noted the quivering of her lip. It was very evident to him that she was genuinely disappointed, and felt his implied rebuke. But at the same time there came a new light into her eyes, which gave her courage, and which he could not understand. Travers, in spite of the high moral standpoint he had taken up, felt his resolution waver; in another instant the natural kindly impulses of the man had reasserted themselves.

"I beg your pardon," he said, quietly, "but I find it very hard to forget. Give me some coffee, Mrs. Trendennis; I am both tired and thirsty. It was very good of you to remember us. I think the ranche is

safe anyhow. The hay is also saved, and the country to the east."

He took a cup gently from her hand and dipped it in the pitcher, and taking a sandwich from the basket which she held out to him, ate it in silence ; but all the time she eyed him narrowly. Then she asked him, timidly, where he had left the round-up, and how he had managed to get through the prairie-fire ; but never once did she mention her husband's name. In the sombre light he looked upon the fair face that was turned up to him familiarly, and his thoughts went back to the days when she had looked up to him just as she did now, but under such different circumstances. It seemed unreal, and like some quaint dream to see her face looking from out the surrounding gloom, with the lurid light playing upon it. Surely it was one of those fantastic dreamland scenes ; for oftentimes he had spoken to her just like this, with all the trouble and tragedy of the past as if it had never been. Every minute he expected to wake up and find that he had been dreaming. And now they seemed to forget that time was precious, and she urged him to eat and drink. "Cousin Ned" and Briggs were at least three hundred yards away, and the imaginary dragons they were fighting were having a rough time of it.

"Why don't you go home to England, Dick?" She was not aware that she was using the old name. "You must be tired of wandering about the world

like this : your people will be glad to see you back, I'm sure."

She had said this in a quiet, earnest way.

"Not they!" he laughed. "If the old folks had been alive I would have gone long ago. The prodigal son, if he does go back in rags, is always the same little chap they dreamt and prayed such different things about. But it is a cold reception, generally speaking, a man gets from his other relatives, if he does not happen to have a pound or two in his pocket. More especially, if either through his own folly or misfortune, he has gone down in the social scale, while they have gone up. No ; if I went home I would only be 'that scape-grace Dick,' and they would speculate as to the cheapest way of getting rid of me again. With all due reverence to the Scriptures, I often think it very evident that the man who fell amongst thieves, when travelling from Jerusalem to Jericho, was a stranger to the good Samaritan, and not a relation ; other wise, three men might have passed by on the other side instead of two. Oh, no !" he concluded with a cynical little laugh, "the only thing I have left now is my independence, and that is not of much account—goodness knows. Had I a brother, it is to be hoped I would be speaking differently."

She would not trust herself to refute what he said ; but there was a brighter look in her eyes when she again spoke, and they became wonderfully soft as she

looked at him. Surely she was not the woman who had wrecked the life of this man !

"We must see more of you, Dick, before we go back to England. And there are two girls who have come here on a visit whom I should like you to know ; they came a couple of days ago. We are going to organise a sort of camping-out excursion after the round-up is over, and going away south into the unknown country. You can either shoot with Mr. Terry, and Tredennis, or look after the girls, and see that they don't get lost, whichever you like best. I think we should have a good time." She noticed the short shake of his head implying dissent, and hastened to say "Oh, but you must come !"

But here Dick recollected himself. Was it for him to stand idly here, talking to Mrs. Tredennis, while others were busily engaged fighting the fire ? Another hour's work and they would have fought it to the creek, and all danger would be past.

"Mrs. Tredennis," he said at length, "go back to the ranche, or let me go back with you ; I can take the basket to Briggs ; I must not let these two do all the work."

"I should say you had done more than your share already," she said, simply. "I shall go back by myself. Neither the girls nor I shall go to bed until you have come back ; and remember you must come over to the house with 'Cousin Ned,' as we always call him." And inclining her head smilingly, she

went off in the dim light towards the ranche again.

The imaginary dragons slain by the redoubtable Cousin Ned, and Briggs still seemed as numerous as ever. Tredennis, took Briggs' place; and after an hour's hard work, the fire had been fought to the edge of the creek; and now the ranche and the pasture to the east of it might be said to be saved. Round about them was an inky darkness, but far away to the south and north could be seen feeble reflections in the sky, where the fire was dying hard. They made their way back to the ranche, and Cousin Ned, who now somewhat resembled a chimney-sweep, and a disreputable one at that, looked down in the gloom upon his natty, Poole made trousers, and dainty white shirt, now anything but dainty.

"Whew!" he exclaimed, "I think, Travers, I rather think I've had exertion enough to last me all the rest of my natural life—first time in my life, by the way, I ever did anything—glad to have made myself useful; but hope to goodness those girls have gone to bed."

But those girls had not gone to bed, and the little man, when he came near the front of the house, (he had seriously meditated slipping in by a window, or by some back way), stood still with horror, for there was a light in that French window, and the laughing voices of girls came from it.

Dick, had to take him by the arm and arouse him from the spell of horror that had overtaken him.

"Come this way," he said to him, "you can wash in my quarters, and then go over; when you've put your coat over your shirt it will be all right."

The little man would have wrung Dick's hand with gratitude, at such an unexpected deliverance, had Dick given him an opportunity. They had a good wash at MacMillan's; and Dick was about to wish the little man good-night, or rather good-morning, when Briggs came in, and told him that Mrs. Tredennis wanted to see him over at the house.

"Of course you've got to come," said Cousin Ned; "in fact, I'm not going there without you: so come along."

Dick felt as if he rather would have been excused—in fact, he felt that to have let him go quietly to bed would have been the greater kindness. Most likely it meant more refreshment. It was like the pranks of three giddy girls to sit up till that time of the morning, and organise an impromptu entertainment of the kind. He did not feel very like meeting young ladies in his rather begrimed condition; but as Cousin Ned, on account of his inexperience, was in a much worse plight than he was, he would make the best of things.

They went round by the front door, and entered. The French window was thrown open, and a flood of light poured out upon the grey morn. There was a Napierian coffee-stand upon the table, and a spirit lamp underneath it; a tray with substantial looking cups and saucers; and another with dainty looking

sandwiches. There were two fresh, fair-haired, Saxon-looking girls regarding Cousin Ned laughingly, and the newcomer with not a little curiosity ; and there was Mrs. Tredennis, who, all smiles and in the heartiest manner in the world, bade them enter. She introduced Travers to the two sisters, whose name was Dalton ; and then bestowed her attention to making the coffee and to Cousin Ned. It was a touch of home comfort that Dick had not experienced for many a long day ; under its influence he forgot the trouble that somehow always haunted him like an evil shadow, and talked away to the two girls as if he must have known them of old. But it was Cousin Ned to whom was left the literal task of making his mark ; and he did so in a most thorough and conscientious manner.

Travers, when he entered, conscious of the condition—which was sooty—of his nether garments, had carefully avoided sitting down on any chair about which there was any suspicion of upholstery or covering of a delicate nature. But innocent Cousin Ned, plumped down on one which was covered with some light chintz pattern, and the result was, that when he rose to assist Mrs. Tredennis by handing round the cups, the effect was alarmingly apparent. Then Mrs. Tredennis pretended to be very much distressed, and the two girls laughed immoderately. Poor Ned looked ruefully upon his work, but only for a second, and brightening up declared that “he had made his

mark at last." He had been trying to do it, he said, for quite a number of years and would have given up in despair, but this was encouragement indeed. In fact, the little man seemed in no way put out. Mrs. Tredennis seemed in the best of spirits; and despite the early hour of the morning and the fatigue which he had undergone, Dick, drawn out by the light-heartedness of the little party, chatted away unreservedly. He told some amusing experiences he had met with in his rolling-stone existence; and which seemed to his audience almost like a page out of some wonderful work of fiction. He was quite forgetting the lateness of the hour, when suddenly he recollected himself, and sprang to his feet to apologise and bid them good-night.

"Have you any message to send back to Mr. Tredennis?" he asked his hostess, "because, when I've had a couple of hours' sleep, I'll go back to the round-up."

"You need be in no hurry to go," she said, simply. "No, I don't think I have any word to send. I only hope you may all soon be back again; Ned, here, is good enough, only, when there is no one else——" The little man here darted an indignant look at her. "Besides, we must see about that excursion into No-Man's Land, when you come back, and of course I want you, and Mr. Holmes, to come with us. We must make the most of our time now, before the winter sets in."

Half hesitatingly, she held her hand out to him—perhaps she had only done it unconsciously from the force of habit—and for the first time for many years he took it in his. But there was something in her action that he could not understand, and afterwards, when he had retired to his own quarters, he puzzled over it.

“She could not have realised the evil she has wrought me,” he said to himself, “or she would not have dared to offer me her hand. Curse her for her heartlessness!” he added, bitterly, as the old pain that had been gnawing at his heart for years, began to ache again in the loneliness of his quarters.

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CHAPTER X.

DEEPER IN THE TOILS.

NEXT morning, or rather on the same morning of the events narrated in the last chapter, Dick was up betimes, and with a strange feverish eagerness to be off. He was even up before the indefatigable Mrs. MacMillan, of whom the irrepressible Billie was wont to say that, according to his firm belief, that good dame never went to bed at all. Billie, however, did not like the Scotch. They were too painfully suggestive of the practical details and hum-drum monotony of this work-a-day world for him ; and Billie's soul, would fain have soared above the sordid necessity of having to work for a living.

To Dick's chagrin, he found his horse, Barney, lame. The poor animal stood in the stall with a dejected air ; there was a pinched look about it, and the hay in the rack was untouched. However, on hearing Dick's step, it cocked its ears, and, turning round, whinnied, as some horses do, brushing its nose against his face, and testifying to its affection

with dumb eloquence. It is, perhaps, not to be wondered at after all ; but those whose horse has been their most constant companion (whether in the Australian bush or on the North American prairies, where the wily black man lurks with his spear in the mallee scrub, or where the red man or the grizzly lurks in the coulee) can testify that at the first signs of danger, the horse seeks the camp and its master. Dick, divining there was something wrong, was leading it outside, when he discovered what he feared, and what his practised eye had told him—Barney was suffering from the effects of the wild ride of the day before, and had contracted a strain. "Oh, my poor Barney!" he cried aloud, with concern ; and then, his mood changing quickly, as was his wont, he continued, "Curse me for a fool for killing a horse like you, to help those who hold my life of as little account as they do yours !"

"Indeed !"

She stood there in the doorway ; a lovely vision truly, in her bright, trim, morning dress. It was Mrs. Tredennis. With her fresh, fair face, and a gleam of sunlight in her hair, an artist might have taken her as his model for a modern Aphrodite, or Hermione : she seemed to breathe of the spirit of the dawn. So light had her step been, that he had not heard her approach.

And now, as she heard his words, her head was thrown back, her cheek was slightly flushed, and

there was an indignant light in her eyes. It was not difficult, however, to see that a spirit of disappointment and mortification tinged her voice, although she tried to conceal this fact, and that underneath all, there lurked some secret trouble that made her patient with this man.

"Indeed!" she continued. "By what right, I ask you, Mr. Travers, do you say such things of me? Have I not asked you to leave the past alone? and have you not said yourself, that I am nothing to you?—for it would be useless of me to pretend to misunderstand your meaning."

He had faced her as soon as he had spoken his strange speech, and had become aware of her presence, in an annoyed and angry fashion, and as if he were ready to defend his rude speech. But there are many things spoken aloud, and meant to be so, in a moment of excitement, that one would wish unheard. Now, he was ashamed to think—no matter what his estimate of her was—that within the last twelve hours he had twice forgotten that respect which was due to her as a lady, and that due to himself as a gentleman. Moreover, he was chagrined to think she should discover that she occupied that share in his thoughts which she did. After all, this palpable contempt for her, which he tried to wear, as it were, upon his sleeve, had for its origin a reason which was very different from its apparent issue, and which in vain he tried to rid himself of. It was the smoulder-

ing embers of an old fire—his old love for her. In a second their positions were reversed.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Tredennis," he said, in a quiet and totally different manner. "I don't know what the matter is with me sometimes ; I am continually saying things that I don't mean. I'll soon be so cranky, that no one will be able to live with me."

He was uneasy, and picked up one of Barney's legs.

"That is better, Dick." She gave a little uneasy laugh. "In any case, don't let us quarrel. I've enough to bear without doing that. Now, you must not misunderstand me." (He had looked up into her face suddenly, with one hand still upon Barney's fetlock). "*He*, is goodness itself to me."

She might have added, and quite truthfully too, that she felt ashamed of herself sometimes, when she thought of the slight return she made of this kindness.

And Dick said bitterly to himself, "Curse her, it is always of him she thinks ; he doesn't care for her any more than he does for one of his most useful dogs ; and she speaks of him now, as she once spoke of me."

When a man curses a woman, he either thinks himself justified in doing so, or else he has been mis-called a man.

But the unanswered question which had arisen was,

what burden was it that this woman had to bear, and which she so vaguely referred to? She interrupted his thoughts.

"Poor Barney!" she said, patting his sleek mane and honest nose, and regarding anxiously the drawn up leg, where Dick was locating the seat of the trouble. "Oh, Dick, do you think it pains him much? Do you think he will soon get all right again?"

Dick did not even smile at her solicitude. "Oh, yes, I think he will," he said, somewhat ruefully, however. "Only I cannot take him with me; I must take another horse; there are lots here luckily. Perhaps you might allow Briggs to take a look at Barney's leg now and again; he is more experienced than young Adams."

He looked at her inquiringly; but she only smiled upon him by way of reply.

After a pause, she said, "And I myself shall see that Briggs does it."

"Thanks!" Then he continued, in a very different tone of voice from that which he had adopted at first, "You must be a very early riser, Mrs. Tredennis?"

He led poor limping Barney back into the stall.

"I usually am," she said, guiltily, and feeling somehow secretly glad that the letter she had written to her husband over-night was safe in her pocket, and that, after all, he knew nothing of it. "But you will

not go back to the round-up to-day? Surely, you rode enough yesterday to do you for a couple of days?"

But seeing the look of a fixed purpose upon his face, she continued, "Then if you will let us know, just a little before you start out, perhaps the girls, Mr. Terry, and I will ride with you part of the way. I want to find the old Macleod trail where it crosses Eagle Butte. In the meantime, you had better come over and have breakfast with us. You cannot come! I am afraid, Dick, you are in rather an unsociable mood this morning. Then we will see you later on."

And with a pleasant nod she tripped off, as if theirs had been the most casual acquaintance in the world.

Dick looked after her thoughtfully; the suddenness with which her mood had changed puzzled him. Her bearing towards him was an enigma from first to last. His instincts—and perhaps they are the safer guides—told him that she was playing a part. He firmly believed that this woman had jilted him for the most mercenary of motives, and in the cruellest way. Fate (so called, and only a natural sequence of events, which, were it possible for one individual to control, might be attended with less remarkable coincidences) had brought them together again in a manner that few romancists would have dreamt of. He could not reconcile the part she played, which

was not that of the conscious wrongdoer, but rather that of one whose moral sense and finer feelings, have been deadened to that which ought to have been palpable. It was difficult for him to believe that the girl he had once known, and whose nobility of soul he had once believed in, just as firmly as he had believed in that parental love which had watched over him when a child, had changed so utterly. But still the fact remained that when he had taxed her with heartless conduct towards him, she had not attempted to gainsay it. She had only asked him to dismiss the past from his mind altogether. Was it that she made light of the past, and could never have felt as he had done? Or was it that, deep down within her, there was a "still, small voice" that would not be hushed, and which she tried to appease by endeavouring to make amends—by treating him with a kindness and consideration, with the ultimate hope, perhaps, that time might dull the edge of his disappointment, and show him all that was commonplace in her nature? Perhaps he might be brought to see that she was not worthy of his serious consideration after all. She had the keen instincts of her sex; but doubtless she under-rated the deep, strong under-current of this man's nature. Instead of trying to cure him of the old disease, she ought to have allowed it to run its course, and let him go on his own way. But it was the old story of the Argonaut of old-world seas, with Scylla on the one side, and

Charybdis on the other. Better for herself and himself, perhaps, if she had let him go.

But Dick was in an uncharitable frame of mind; he told himself that she was a heartless coquette—one who had the power to draw him whichever way her fancy listed. She was in his eyes a species of human vampire, whose thirst for the blood of man would never be satiated—she played a part in order to consummate the utter destruction of his already wrecked life. And still she was the wife of another man. But so was Laura when Petrarch made her name immortal, and pined for the love of her in the dim, dead past, hundreds of years ago, in sunny Italy. Alas! that the higher law should grow weaker, and be lost sight of, as Nature's law asserts its more potent touch. But is this not only part of the great scheme—that only through the lessons Error teaches, shall mind at last attain the mastery over matter?

He cursed her for her heartlessness; and he cursed himself for his folly, in that he could not break the spell that bound him to her, and which was ever more surely weaving its invisible toils around him.

Dick went into the foreman's house, and having had what little breakfast he wanted, was about to send some excuse over to Mrs. Tredennis, and start off by himself, when he was surprised by the volatile Mr. Terry, otherwise Cousin Ned, breaking in upon him.

"How are you, my dear fellow; how are you?" said that individual, shaking Dick by the hand, as if he were a particularly near and dear relative whom he had lost sight of for at least a dozen years. "Heard you were up at a most unconscionable hour, and that you insist on going back to the round-up. Now if you must go back, the ladies and I would like to ride part of the way with you. They want to have a look at a bit of burnt prairie, I suppose; rather a dismal sight I should fancy. You'll let us know when you think of starting out?"

The spirits of the little man were infectious.

"I'm going as soon as I can catch a horse," said Dick; "the lad has run a few into the corral. Didn't know there was more than one lady's hack on the ranche."

"Mrs. Tredennis broke in a couple to the side-saddle while you've been away. I'll just run across and tell them, and get Briggs to saddle up. You won't have a drop of something before you start? No!—quite right—sun not in the desired quarter yet when taken advantage of by nautical men. Back in a jiffey," and Cousin Ned, still talking, hurried off.

In half an hour the party had saddled up and were ready for a start. Mrs. Tredennis rode her own bay mare, and the Dalton girls, and Mr. Terry rode well-cared-for and evidently well-broken bronchos, which for general use and sure-footedness, are by far the best and most serviceable hacks on the prairie.

Away they went over the billowy expanse of rolling prairie, and left the bright-coloured, bold, pine-crested crags behind them. There was a peculiar smell as of some burnt substance in the keen, dry air, and a haziness in the eastern horizon that betokened the presence of the Fire King in that direction. They crossed Medicine Lodge Coulee, and rounded the shoulder of "Eagle Butte" by the old Fort Macleod trail. Then. Lo! as if by the wand of an enchanter, a weird sight met their gaze—an apparently limitless, jet-black landscape.

Far as the eye could reach to the west, lay a rolling land of buttes and coulees, that, like billow upon billow on an interminable expanse of ocean, pursued and rose one on another, until they rolled away and became part of the dead level again of the far horizon line. But they were billows of a vivid, inky blackness—they were black as night, and contrasted strangely with the smiling azure of the heavens. To one who had never seen the effects of a prairie fire, it was an *outré* sight. But to look towards the south-west there was another effect, and a stranger one still. For, as if a jagged knife had been drawn from north-east to south-west, the country to the east of that jagged line was untouched by the fire, and the result was, that one-half of the landscape was of a light grey tone, and the other was as black as ink. And set in the bosom of that jet-black sea, like a diamond set in a bed of ebony, gleamed Pagh-ogh-kee Lake, that lake

which the Indians have named Bad Water Lake, now none the less striking on account of the snow-white alkali which crusted its banks, and contrasted so strongly with its setting.

"Do you think it would be possible to convey, even a faint idea of such a scene, supposing one could transfer it to canvas?" Mrs. Tredennis asked Dick. She had brought her horse alongside his, and asked the question in an abstracted fashion.

"The scene is blighted and desolate enough: to you it might prove a congenial subject; for my part I'd prefer something more cheerful." He said this easily enough, and without looking at her.

She turned her head quickly and looked at him; the same flush coming into her cheeks, and the same light into her eyes, just as they had done only a few hours before. She gazed at him steadily for a second or two, then turned away without making any comment on what savoured of flippancy.

"It is fortunate you have to go in a southerly direction," she said, at length, "for now we can keep off the burnt country. It is not a particularly cheerful sight, I must admit." She checked her horse for an instant, under the pretext of getting something from the pouch attached to her side-saddle; but when she rode on again it was alongside Mr. Terry. And the two quick-witted English girls intuitively exchanged glances; they had seen her in a light which was not only a surprise, but a puzzle to them.

From such trivial details, are strange conclusions sometimes drawn.

It was a glorious autumn day, and as they rode abreast they chatted merrily and unreservedly. The keen, dry air of the prairie is an elixir whose power can only be estimated by those who have experienced it. Suddenly, and as they walked their horses along a stony coulee through which a languidly flowing creek filtered, they met with an unexpected interruption.

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CHAPTER XI.

"HANDS UP," AND THE NORTH-WEST MOUNTED POLICE.

THE interruption, referred to in the preceding chapter, came in the shape of a horseman, who, in a second, Dick recognised as a North-West Mounted Policeman, belonging to that semi-military organisation, whose pet predilections are horse thieves, "bad men," and Indians. Though in undress prairie-rig there was no mistaking him. Peeping from the tops of his heavy leather chaperegos were the dark blue, tight-fitting breeches, with the yellow stripe of the dragoon—one could not see the long riding boots. He wore no coat, but a dark grey shirt with a white pocket-handkerchief tied round his neck loosely, showing his sun-burnt throat. A dark karkee jacket, with a neat military button, was tied to the saddle behind him. A brown slouch hat shaded his eyes. To the high horn of his Californian saddle was slung a Winchester repeating rifle, of large calibre; a heavy Enfield revolver, and a belt full of brass cartridges encircled

his waist. He rode a mettlesome broncho, which bore the legend M.P. branded on its near shoulder, and there was a regimental number branded on its hoof. The man himself was a good-looking fellow enough, with an alert, pleasant, open face that was tanned by the sun and wind until it was as brown as a berry. There was an air about him that bespoke a training which the cowboy—whom at first sight he not a little resembled—could not lay claim to. When he raised his broad-brimmed prairie hat on approaching the party, he showed keen, dark eyes, that were quick to observe, and betokened a mind that was as quick to act. Belonging to a profession that has at all times to be prepared to face danger, a certain air of *sang-froid* sat well on a resolute but not unkindly face. He had walked his horse down a little side coulee that led to the creek bottom. A little further up the coulee could be observed other two Mounted Policemen, and a long-haired, lanky half-breed, who was evidently a scout. When he got within a few yards of them, he was evidently not a little surprised to find such a strange party in such an out-of-the-way part of the country; he halted, but said, without seeming embarrassment—

"I beg your pardon for interrupting you, and I can only make the discharge of my duty my apology. You see I am a Mounted Policeman. I do not wish to alarm you, ladies; but if you wouldn't mind waiting up this coulee for half an hour or so, or at least

travelling in some other direction than down this creek bottom, I should be very much obliged. The fact of the matter is, there's a couple of fellows camped at the present moment not a couple of miles from here, with whom we are anxious to have an interview. They come from Montana, and one is wanted for murder; both are wanted for lack of discrimination between their own and their neighbour's horseflesh. We were just proceeding to hold them up when we saw you coming, but thought perhaps you would like an opportunity of avoiding such a painful interview." He smiled pleasantly and as if he were telling about the most commonplace matter in the world. Observing Dick particularly, he addressed himself to him. "I see you have your revolver, and I know who you are. If you care about taking a hand in the formalities, we shall be glad to have you, as I've one man—a lad here—whom I think it would be more discreet to leave with the spare horses; I rather think that 'Black Jim' and his worthy friend have a couple of horses in their possession, that you will be able to identify. The other gentleman"—looking at Mr. Terry—"can stop and protect the ladies."

"By all means," Dick answered, eagerly. He looked at the ladies inquiringly; but there was no dissent in their looks.

"Do you mind excusing me?" he asked. "I consider it only my duty to go. You see, these Montana

chaps are evidently making free with our horses. You can go back to the ranche, if you would prefer it, or rest here up the coulee. Perhaps you had better go back," he added, thoughtfully.

His manner had changed. There was a chance of a tussle and a bit of excitement, not to speak of a considerable spice of danger, and his spirits rose. He looked at Mrs. Tredennis.

"Why, certainly go, Mr. Travers," she said promptly, and as if some of the excitement of the situation had communicated itself to her. "I wish"—turning to the trooper—"that I were a man, to be able to go with you."

The trooper, no matter what surprise he felt at this rather unorthodox speech, merely lifted his hat and smiled in a pleased sort of fashion.

Then turning again to Dick, she added—

"You can go if you want to, and we shall rest up here until you come back; but pray take care of yourself, and don't be rash—you always were."

"Oh, I'll be all right," Dick answered, carelessly. And then as the party turned their horses' heads up the coulee, and his horse almost brushed against that of Mrs. Tredennis, he said, in a lower tone, and with a slight laugh "Your solicitude is very gratifying, I'm sure." And the elder of the two English girls—she with the fair, fresh skin, and the thoughtful look in her striking dark blue eyes—heard the veiled sarcasm, and turned away her face quickly, so that she might hear no more.

The rest of the party acquiesced readily in the plan. The non-commissioned officer of police—for such he was—led them up the little coulee. When they had reached a little grassy amphitheatre the troopers came forward, and with a courtesy which somewhat surprised the ladies of the party, assisted them to dismount. Perhaps the latter had forgotten the fact just then, that the rank and file of this force is largely composed of gentlemen.

"Here, Jim," said the non-com., "get the hobbles out of the pack ; or perhaps, under the circumstances, it would be better simply to tie the horses up in the shade." There was a couple of ancient cotton-wood trees, keeping sentinel over a little spring in the side of the coulee. "Now, Markham"—this to a good looking young fellow, who seemed a mere lad—"you have got to stop here and keep your eye on the spare horses. I'm sorry I can't ask you to take a hand in this affair, but you will be performing a more important duty by remaining here with the ladies. We shall not be longer away than we can help. You, sir"—turning to Dick—"can take this spare Winchester. Yes, magazine full and one in the breech : eight shots. All right ? Then we shall proceed." At the same moment he quickly pushed a pair of nickel-plated handcuffs into his belt, and flung another pair to the other constable. "Carry them so that they won't rattle," he said, briefly.

"Now then, Mac," said Markham, "if you're

inclined to be rash, think of Larry's ten-dollar coffin."

The non-com. only laughed.

"Do I gather from what you say," queried Mr. Terry, "that a policeman's funeral expenses are limited to two pounds sterling? You can't get a decent coffin for that."

"No, not a decent one," answered the communicative youngster, "and I'll tell you because I think it ought to be known; but it will get one like the temper of the man who framed the General Order regarding it—a deuced 'indifferent' one."

Then the policemen and the dark-eyed, long-haired scout, tightened the cinches on their saddles, slung their carbines, and without a word headed up the coulee. In another minute they had passed out of sight. The breed was in the lead, then the non-com., then Dick, and the "buck" brought up the rear.

And all this had happened in such a very few minutes that before the ladies and Mr. Terry could almost realise it, they were alone with the youthful Mounted Policeman. After a few minutes, during which this individual had furtively "taken stock" of the ladies of the party, and after having seen that the horses were tied up properly, he broke the silence. He was evidently a gentleman, but an odd character, and addressed himself to Mr. Terry; but the ladies had the benefit of, and were not a

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little amused by his conversation. It was very evident he was much disappointed at not being allowed to accompany his comrades; but the ladies he was left with were young and good looking, and so, what he had set his heart upon doing, and his innate gallantry, had a hard struggle within him.

"It's always the way," he remarked, sadly; "my chance for the stripes gone again, unless Mac, that's the non-com., puts in a word for me. They'll have to look out for 'Black Jim,' however; he shot a comrade over at Benton, and he will put some lead into one or other of them safe enough, if they don't look precious smart. It means transportation for life if not hanging for him anyhow, so he doesn't care what he does."

"You think there's a chance of one or other of them getting shot, then?" asked Miss Dalton, as she sat on the mossy bank, tapping one of her boots with her riding whip, and gazing fixedly at the opposite side of the little coulee. She raised her eyes suddenly, and scanned the face of the policeman, who wondered if he had forgotten himself, and inadvertently lapsed in some "barrack-room" jargon. He blushed, and stammered—

"Well, yes—no—that is, there can be little doubt. I should not like to commit myself, but I should certainly say that of your two friends, this gentleman runs much less risk of getting some lead introduced into his system than the other one."

"Why, come now," interrupted the somewhat discomfited Cousin Ned, "I like that, you know ; I had as little choice in the matter as you had yourself. I would rather have enjoyed a pop at the beggars."

The younger of the two girls straightway called him a "blood-thirsty creature," but Mrs. Tredennis and Miss Dalton were evidently in a thoughtful mood. However were they to put in the time until the party came back again? Mrs. Tredennis looked at her watch—ten minutes past twelve. It was twelve when Dick had left them. What a strange and unexpected position for a party of well-bred English people to be in, who perhaps only a few weeks before had been unconcernedly picking their way along the classic flags of Oxford Street.

"However," said the good-looking irrepressible, "they have not M'Ginty to spoil the whole thing ; and Louey, that's the scout, is to be relied upon."

"Who is M'Ginty?" asked Mr. Terry, only too glad to indulge in conversation however trivial. The ladies were so strangely silent, and the time seemed to drag so heavily.

"Well, perhaps it is questionable taste—if it is not indiscreet to begin with—to talk about my superiors to comparative strangers ; but then M'Ginty has through his own folly rendered himself so notorious, that there are few members of the force who scruple to talk about him openly. M'Ginty, as we call him, is an inspector. He got his commission through

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political influence—some uncle or other who only imperfectly knew his nephew. When he laid down the yard-stick—he had been in a dry-goods store—and took up the sword, like all beggars when put on horseback, he became a martinet and the laughing-stock of the force. He once told a comrade of mine to use his own discretion in a certain difficult task he was engaged in. Then, when this man did his duty—a difficult and unpleasant one, I can tell you—and incurred the ill-will of a few civilian friends of this inspector's, and with whom he clashed, M'Ginty fined him on suspicion of having used his own brains, and for not keeping awake for seventy-two hours at a stretch. He was told that 'a policeman was a machine, and not supposed to think.' Goodness save the mark ! Why, there are men of the rank and file—but I'd better hold my tongue. I've said more than I intended to say."

The younger Miss Dalton laughed. "Was there no appeal for your friend?" she asked.

"Thank goodness, there was!" answered the communicative young private. "M'Ginty's superior was a sensible man as well as a gentleman, and promptly sat on M'Ginty. We have many good officers, however. Perhaps the best we ever had, was the late Assistant Commissioner, Colonel Herchmer."

There was a pause after this, during which the policeman employed himself in fixing the buckle of a very unregimental looking Mexican spur, and

looking furtively at the younger of the two girls. Mrs. Tredennis had risen from the mossy bank on which she had seated herself, and was pacing aimlessly backwards and forwards. Miss Dalton sat silent and immovable, with an uneasy look on her face that in vain she tried to conceal; and in the faces of both women there was that wearied expression, as of minds which are undergoing some painful tension. Even Mr. Terry behaved strangely; for that gentleman after lengthening his stirrups by a couple of holes, as carefully shortened them again to their original length; and then for lack of something better to do, gravitated in an aimless fashion from one horse to another, as if studying the habits of these interesting quadrupeds.

What was going on down the coullee, and would Dick never come back? Mrs. Tredennis looked at her watch again—half-past twelve. How heavily the minutes dragged. It seemed an age since the police party left.

Suddenly, and with an ominous sound that paled the cheeks of the women, and caused the Mounted Policeman to spring to his feet, a couple of shots rang out down the coullee; then another shot was heard—two rifle shots and one revolver. In another second a series of remarkable echoes were heard. They rattled from hillside to hillside, seeming to gain strength as they rolled along, and then dying away again in the far distance.

What an eternity in the minutes that followed.

Following one another in Indian file the Police party, accompanied by Dick, ascended the coulee, and then keeping as much as possible in any slight low-lying ground that the nature of the bench permitted, they threaded their way across the somewhat exposed plateau. No one spoke for a few minutes; but the keen, dark eyes of the long-haired half-breed shifted restlessly around, putting one in mind of his near ancestor, the primitive red-man in the hunt, or on the war-path. When they had ridden a matter of a mile or so, they came suddenly to steep cut banks, between which ran a sluggish stream of water, which trickled over slabs of a slate-like formation, and between and under a tangled undergrowth. From it rose box-elder, wolf-willow, and birch, whose golden and bronze tints imparted a richness of colouring beautiful to look upon.

In a little basin overlooking this creek—which about half a mile further down joined the main coulee—they paused, and held a brief council of war.

"Now, Louey," said the non-com., turning to the half-breed, "you want to dismount and leave your horse with us. Get down into the creek, crawl through the bushes (you can do this sort of thing better than any of us can) and take stock of where the beggars are, and where their firearms are placed.

For God's sake don't let any of them see you! Luckily they haven't a dog. If they should by any chance see you" (and here he lowered his voice), "don't stand upon ceremony with them, or wait for an introduction—they won't; fire low, and drop your man. It will be your only chance, you understand. Lose no time in getting back, so that we may know the best way of getting the 'dead drop' upon them, as they are rather distinguished gentry, and desperate ones to boot. And give us the call, you know, so that we can tell where you are in case of accidents."

"You bet, boss; I am the hackimo!" answered Louey, whose long, gaunt face was by no means an unpleasant one. "No, I sha'n't take any rifle; better without one; my revolver's good enough. Take care of yourselves."

And with this speech, Louey handed his reins over to the constable, crawled to the edge of the cut-bank, dropped over it, and disappeared.

"He's the best, or one of the best scouts the Mounted Police have," whispered the non-com. to Dick. "He is true as steel; and can knock the head off a prairie-chicken with a Winchester at sixty yards. Listen!"

A curlew down the coullee had evidently been disturbed by the breed's progress, for Dick could hear its mournful, eerie cry as it flew off piping down the hollow. Dick, however, could not see the bird.

"Damn the bird!" said the trooper, "it makes an awful row." He, however, looked knowingly at his comrade as he spoke.

The non-com. smiled as he explained to Dick, "That's no bird. It's Louey letting us know his whereabouts. Everything is right so far."

Did you ever hunt with the Australian savage in the bush, or the red-man on the North American prairies, where there was a strip of timber? No? Then follow this scout, the descendant of the red-man, to whose inherited hunting instincts has been added some of the superior intelligence of the white man.

Now, down on his hands and knees; then, crawling along the ground like some half-human reptile (if such an expression is permissible), he makes his way through the tangle and undergrowth, and bears down the coullee. He come to a little knoll; with a toss of his head he shakes his long black hair from in front of his eyes, and until it falls over his shoulders. Slightly turning his head on one side, and with every instinct quickened, he slowly, slowly raises his head, till from behind a tussock of grass, with one eye only, perhaps, he can see over the little knoll. He is evidently satisfied with his survey, for one can almost hear him breathing again. Rising to his feet he seeks the half-dry bed of the watercourse. Crouching down until with his long arms his hands

occasionally help to balance him on the ground, he shambles along at an easy jog. His movements remind one of the ungainly slouch of a bear. And now he comes to a thick undergrowth, and here his movements change again. He glides like a shadow; he crawls like a snake; he steps as gingerly as a dancing master might be expected to do upon a carpet strewed with eggs; but never by any chance does he disturb a bough, or snap a rotten twig; you can hardly hear the rustle of a leaf. But now a wild cat catches sight of him, which, with an angry snarl, and a rush from its lair in the tangled undergrowth, heads off down the coulee. In a second, the piercing notes of a curlew rise from the place where the scout lies hid.

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A couple of rough-looking men on a clear spot, about a hundred yards or so further down at the junction of the two coulees, are seated on the ground. They are in a slight hollow, and are watching a camp-kettle boil upon the small fire they have made. Their saddles and other gear are lying about; and in a small pocket, on the opposite side of the coulee, a small mob of horses are to be seen feeding.

They are smoking their pipes and looking moodily into the feeble blaze; evidently their thoughts are none of the most pleasant.

"Did you hear that?" one of them asks suddenly

and with an anxious look in his eyes as he suddenly lifts his head, and looks at his comrade.

In the great stillness of this lone prairie-land they could hear a faint rustling amongst the wolf-willows up the little coulee to their right, as if some wild animal had been disturbed, and was scurrying away through the undergrowth. Then the piercing, plaintive cry of a curlew rose as if in alarm upon the still air.

"You're gettin' as narvous as a derved old woman!" answered his amiable comrade, snappishly. He was no other than the notorious Black Jim. "One would think you were cornered in some hole in Montana, and the Vigilant committee were close alongside choosing the tree to string you up on. Dern you! haven't we fooled the boys, and the military too, for that matter of it? To-night we'll pass between the police detachments. Willow Creek is just over there; that derved Scotchman is in charge, I guess—the devil take him!"

Once more the notes of a curlew rose upon the hush of noonday.

Suddenly a covey of prairie-chickens rose right alongside the undergrowth on the edge of the coulee, and flew in a straggling, startled fashion right past them.

"Darn me, pard!" said the man who had spoken first, "there's somethin' comin' down that coulee sure, or my name ain't Solomon. It may be a coyote, or a jack-rabbit, or it may be a bar; but there's somethin', an' I'm curious!"

"You 'ere a d—d curious cuss!" was the polite rejoinder of Black Jim.

But Solomon, like his illustrious namesake, had come pretty near telling the truth. There was "some-thin'," but it was neither a "bar," nor a jack-rabbit—not even a coyote. Whatever it was, it threw itself flat upon its face until it was almost hidden by overhanging sage-brush. It saw the desperado pick up his rifle from the ground; fling it over his arm, and stalk leisurely but watchfully forward. Instinctively the "thing" that lay hid amongst the long grass and brush, moved a brown, sinewy hand down towards an old leather pouch, drew a revolver from it, and there was an ominous "click."

"Come out, ye warmint, whativer ye are!" And a lump of rock came crashing down perilously close to the head of the scout, who was the "thing" lying hid in the grass, and now had over-reached himself for once in his life, and crept too close to his game. But he only lay close as a jack-rabbit, and held his breath. Suddenly the brass cartridges on his belt gleamed in the sunlight, and in another second the desperado had seen him. His first impulse was to serve him just as he would serve a jack-rabbit; but there might be more of them hidden in the undergrowth, and he might get served in the same way, so he simply yelled—

"Put up yer hands!" and covered him with his rifle.

"*Ping!*" was the reply; and dropping his rifle with a yell of rage and pain, the desperado, forgetful

of the danger he was running in exposing himself for the moment to the fire of his opponent, shook a few drops of blood from the fingers of his left hand. But, before he could pick up his rifle again, the breed had bolted like a rabbit back into the undergrowth, and a bullet shaved a lock of hair from his left temple, as neatly as if it had been done by a razor.

"The devil!" exclaimed Black Jim's worthy mate as he got behind a rock.

In another minute he was joined by his illustrious compeer, who had sprung to his feet and grabbed his rifle when he had heard his mate's voice. He also thought it the better part of valour to keep a foot or two of solid rock between him and the scrub.

"It's a darned police scout, I'll be bound!" he exclaimed. "Wonder if he's alone? If so, we'll fill him with lead, and cut his throat from ear to ear!" He positively ground his teeth with rage. "Let's burn him out. You take one side, and I'll take the other; we'll soon fix him. Hillos! what the blazes is that? A shod horse, as I'm a living sinner!"

And they looked the very princes of sinners as they stood there. They put one in mind of a couple of cornered jackals; their eyes simply glaring with mortification and rage. Then sharply and clearly there rang out the ominous words—

"Hands up; we've got the drop on you this time!" and three deadly-looking rifle barrels were levelled straight down upon them.

"The devil you have! Take that, you demned red-coats!" For quick as thought, and with that marvellous celerity—that instinctive sympathy between hand and eye which characterises the movements of gentlemen of fortune in the far West, Black Jim had sent a bullet through Dick's shirt, which, like a sharp stroke from a razor, grazed his right breast, without, however, doing any harm save breaking the skin. Luckily, however, for the non-com., and before Black Jim fell shot through the shoulder, a bullet, which might have found a different billet, glanced harmlessly off the great brass buckle on his cartridge belt, and embedded itself in the mossy bank behind them.

"Now, then, put your hands up!" yelled the non-com. to Jim's worthy mate (he wanted to take one alive, if he could not take both); but that gentleman had already thrown down his rifle, and jerked his bleeding hands high into the air.

"Darn you, you cur!" hissed the fallen desperado to his comrade, "if I could handle my gun I'd pump some lead into you!" and promptly fainted away.

"Cover him with your guns, boys, while I put the bracelets on him," cried the non-com. "Blow him to h— if he moves," and sliding down the bank he produced the bands of polished steel. "Now, my hearty—the other hand first, if you please. You've got to behave yourself; no monkey tricks, or you'll be in Kingdom-come in two shakes of a lamb's tail. Steady!"

Crir-rr-click-click—and in another minute, like Eugene Aram, the "gyves were upon his wrists."

"Some more water, boys—dash it on his face. Prop the poor devil up. I'm afraid he'll cheat the hangman after all. Perhaps, now, and it opens up a strange vein of speculation: as an act of Christian charity would I not be doing my duty in letting him die? But, again, justice and the law demand that his body be 'delivered up': an eye for an eye, and a life for a life. And I am a servant of the law."

He was a cool hand, truly, this soldierly-looking trooper, who could calmly philosophise while his hands were still literally covered with blood. But for all that, he held the head of Black Jim as tenderly as any woman would have done, and did everything that lay in his power to render easy the position of the wounded man.

"He'll pull through all right—collar bone injured. It's Black Jim himself. Take their guns, Pearson; take out the cartridges and unscrew the locks for fear of accidents: I'll search the prisoners. You, Louey, round-up the horses; take the best one and ride to Willow Creek as fast as you can, and tell them to fetch the light spring-waggon and some buffalo robes. Tell them to send into Maple Creek for Dr. H—. And you, sir, you need stop no longer here. Thanks for your help. You're the coolest hand I was ever out with—a good shot that of yours. Apologise for

me to the ladies. If you find any of your horses in the mob, take them now. I'll see you again. Good-bye."

Dick could do no good in waiting longer. He found a couple of ranche horses in the mob, and drove them in front of him. In a few minutes more, Dick had rejoined the party he had left about an hour before.

They looked at him strangely for a second or two, and no one spoke. At last Miss Dalton said—

"What is the matter with your shirt, Mr. Travers?—Why, it's——"

She did not finish her sentence, but looked at the red streak with a spell-bound, horror-stricken gaze. Mrs. Tredennis, whose face had grown ashy pale as she came towards him, caught him quickly by the arm. "Oh, Dick, you are hurt. I know your way of making light of things. Let me do something for you."

"Nonsense," and with a firm but gentle hand he disengaged his arm and whispered something in her ear: "It is only the merest scratch—hardly skin deep. Let us go back to the ranche. I must take these two horses back; the round-up won't see me to-day. I'll go on to-morrow."

He rode back with them to the ranche, and as they went he told them a much-diluted version of what had occurred. It was a noticeable fact that at least two of the ladies of the party were strangely silent.

Dick afterwards heard that Black Jim recovered from the effects of his shot. He would, however, by the laws of extradition, be handed over to the United States authorities, to answer to a graver charge when they had done with him in Canada.

Next morning, and ere the mist had lifted from the Medicine Lodge coulee before the rays of the sun, Dick was on his way again to join the round-up.

CHAPTER XII.

LIKE A WORM I' THE BUD.

IT was a glorious fall. The round-up had been a success, and the stockmen had a comparatively easy time of it after it was over. Dick Travers, who fully intended to have taken his departure from the ranche when the pressure of work had passed, still found himself lingering there. He had once casually suggested his intention of leaving to Tredennis; but that individual seemed so genuinely hurt and surprised at the proposition, that Travers had let the matter drop for the time being. Tredennis probably thought that Travers found it rather dull on the ranche; and as the latter had occasionally some spare time on his hands, the goodness of the rancher's nature showed itself. For whenever Mrs. Tredennis or the girls made an excursion into the woods, or wished to explore some of the dark, pine-clad coulees, he would make some excuse and send Travers or Jack Holmes instead. Cousin Ned, who was an enthusiastic shot, as well as a good one, wandered

about gun in hand from morning till night, bagging innumerable braces of ducks and prairie-chicken. Mrs. Tredennis painted harder than ever, and her work, as if the spirit of these old-world, pine-clad crags had infected her, became, if anything, more striking and weirder in its conception than ever; her landscapes haunted one with a sense of loneliness and desolation. But she herself seemed to be a living protest to her work. She was the life and soul of the party. It was she who organised all the pleasant little excursions. It was she who sent for the lawn-tennis paraphernalia to Winnipeg; and though she did not play herself, would send over for Travers or Holmes of an evening, and while they and the girls played, she seemed to derive as much pleasure from the game by looking on. Perhaps on these occasions Cousin Ned would fall asleep at her feet, with a cigar in his mouth, tired out with the day's exertions. Tredennis himself seldom showed up at such times. But often when Travers went away south on the prairie, to look after some stray cattle or horses, he would take his Winchester and accompany him; and it was seldom he went home without taking either an antelope or black-tail deer with him. As for Jack Holmes, he began to be remarkably fastidious, just about this time, concerning his dress. He discarded the cheap, ready-made high-lows he had worn when he first came to the ranche, and had sent his measure into the nearest

town for the best pair of pointed boots that the worthy cobbler there could furnish him with. He even discarded the fringed and beaded buckskin shirt he had at first affected, and into the buying of which he had been promptly swindled by Billie, and wore a "Crimean" instead, of the most approved texture and pattern. Perhaps the younger of the two Dalton girls could have told how it was that the Sage, about this time, instead of discussing social problems and expatiating upon things in general, to the edification and amusement of his audience, as was his wont, became unaccountably quiet and stupid, and behaved in a more or less idiotic fashion, for one of his otherwise eminently practical turn of mind. As for Dick, there came a subtle change over him, his manner became preoccupied, and sometimes he surprised his comrades not a little when they chanced to accompany him on his long rides, by the taciturn or cynical air he would suddenly adopt, when there was really no occasion in the world that he should do so. But when evening came, his demeanour would undergo another change, and he would find his way over to the rancher's house, when, if he did not play tennis—which he had somewhat given up of late—he might be found sitting at the feet of Mrs. Tredennis, who seemed to find in him a congenial companion. When these evenings were over, the Sage noticed, that if he did not go out for a long walk by himself before retiring, he would sit in the men's quarters in

the dark, and neither spoke nor seemed to care for the companionship of any one.

On one of these occasions, when Reynolds and Billie had retired to rest, and Holmes lay awake in his berth, watching the lonely figure of his comrade as he sat silently in the dusk, looking out upon the night, he saw him start up suddenly and pace the room excitedly but noiselessly. "What is up, I wonder, now?" said the Sage to himself. Sometimes he noticed that Travers would pause in his walk, and talk under his breath. He was exercised over something: that something, the Sage knew had been exercising him a good deal of late. The Sage was about to doze off again, with a confused idea that he was somehow or other lost in a dark wood, and was watching the shadow of a great pine tree, when suddenly the pine tree took human shape and began muttering to itself. In an instant he was wide awake, and his senses were abnormally acute. Listen, he had to; there was no help for it.

"The end cannot be far off," was what Travers said, as if speaking to some one, "for you are drawing me towards you again, as you drew me before—and I am worse than mad. There's a black night coming for you and me, Curissie; this cannot go on for ever!"

Holmes held his breath, and a sickening light dawned upon him: but there was something beyond it all that he could not fathom. Dick had now stopped in his walk, and partially undressing, threw

himself on his bed, where Holmes, from whom all sleep was banished now, heard him turn restlessly again and again, from one side to another, until the grey dawn broke.

It was late in the fall now, perhaps a little too late to make an excursion of the kind, but it was to be their last grand trip preparatory to the little party breaking up, and taking their way eastward, and the preparations for the same were complete and extensive. The nights were cold enough to warrant a fire, and the hectic Indian summer had run perilously far into what in England would be considered a winter month ; but still the days were bright and pleasant. It was the beau-ideal time for hunting—only a fall, a very slight fall of snow, could improve matters in this respect—and the antelope, the black-tail, and the bear, seemed plentiful. Tredennis with characteristic selfishness, or thoughtlessness, wherever sport was concerned, had put off this excursion from day to day, to ensure the better sport. He was now so engrossed with his guns and filling cartridges, that he had little time to attend to the other preparations.

He had simply told Travers, to make out a list of what he would require, and given him *carte-blanche* to get the same.

"We'll take along Reynolds and Holmes," he said, "they can drive a team ; of course Briggs will come and do the cooking. Yourself, Ned, and I can make ourselves generally useful. I'll lend you a rifle ; but

I should like if you would also manage to give the ladies a little of your company now and again ; social intercourse seems to be a necessity of their existence."

But MacMillan viewed all these preparations with a very sober face ; his practical Scotch temperament weighed certain contingencies which the others did not dream of.

"It's late in the fall," he said, "and none of you know how suddenly changes come on in this country. Why, to-day it may be like a day in June, and to-morrow, without any warning whatever, a blizzard (he called it a 'bleezard') comes on, that may last for days, freezing every living thing that is caught in it. Whatever you do, take extra socks and mocassins with you, mitts, and your heavy fur coats. Goodness knows, you may require them."

Travers knew only too well the truth of what the Scotsman said ; but the others merely laughed. They were accustomed to the provisos of the far-seeing Scot.

Holmes was delighted with the prospects of the excursion ; more particularly as a certain young lady was to ride beside him on the front seat of the light spring-waggon. But Dick Travers seemed anything but delighted with the prospects of the trip. He had spoken to Tredennis, and tried to persuade that individual to take MacMillan or Billie, instead ; but he would not listen to this proposition. Tredennis, indeed, felt somewhat sore about his

evident reluctance to accompany the party, and mentioned the subject to his wife, with a vague idea that she might throw some light upon the subject.

"I thought he would only have been too glad to come," he had said. "I'm not so badly off that I need treat Travers and Holmes like two ordinary employees. They have earned a good holiday: to tell the truth, I am only too glad to get fellows like them that we can associate with, instead of having to take men of Billie's stamp, who would scare us every time they opened their mouths. I wonder what the matter can be with Travers?"

She was sitting looking out upon the now grey prairie with the significant streak of blackness in the background—the effects of the fire—and had been reading "Ships that Pass in the Night." But when her husband spoke she had suddenly stopped reading, and held the book as before, but so as to look over the top of it. A slight heightening of colour had at first crept into her cheeks; then as suddenly there was a slight contraction of her arched eyebrows; she became strangely pale, and there was a strange fixedness in her gaze. But her husband saw none of these changes. To tell the truth, he might have seen, and never have given them a thought. When she spoke it was evident there was a shade of irritation in her voice, though she tried to speak unconcernedly.

"I somehow think," she answered, "that your

friend is somewhat difficult to please. Why not let him stop at the ranche? I am sure we could get on well without him. It appears to me that he doesn't know his own mind two minutes at a stretch."

There was the same intensity in her gaze, and she did not move, though her breath came more quickly, and her bosom heaved strangely. There was even a touch of pique in her voice—more than the occasion would seem to call for. Tom looked up quickly and spoke—

"I think, Chrissie, you're rather hard upon poor Travers—I really don't think you do him justice. I noticed that when you saw him for the first time, you did not seem to take to him—you took to the other chap; but Travers is worth a dozen of such men as Holmes. I wouldn't wonder if the poor fellow has made a mess of his life at one time or another, and sometimes feels a little hipped about it. Anyhow, MacMillan says he has done the work of three men since he has been here, and I'm going to take him with us in spite of himself. Amy and Kate should rouse him up; but for my sake be civil to him, if not for his own!"

He rose and went away without waiting for her to comment upon this speech, and without even looking at her.

When he had gone, she rose quickly from her seat and looked strangely around her. She clasped her

hands behind her head, and there was a look of hopeless misery in her eyes. Then she broke into a laugh that was piteous in its very bitterness, and cried—

"For *your* sake indeed!" and then she paused a minute. "But oh! Dick, what about yours?" she added passionately, and hurried from the room.

She entered her bedroom, and locking the door, threw herself upon a couch, and cried as if her heart would break.

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CHAPTER XIII.

THAT LAND WHERE NOBODY LIVES.

THE party was off at last, and to say the least of it, it was a merry one. The morning was clear and frosty—one of those glorious days one only finds late in the fall, the nearer one gets to the Rockies; or on a winter's morning on the Blue Mountains in New South Wales (how one's heart goes out to those beautiful Blue Mountains!).

The ladies had on warm and smart Tweed dresses. Jack Holmes looked at least three inches taller as he sat on the high spring-waggon, talking to a fair-haired young lady who sat beside him. Mrs. Tredennis and the elder of the two Dalton girls rode under the rather dubious protection of Cousin Ned. Tredennis and Travers rode on ahead as a sort of advanced guard and pilotage for the two waggons; one of which Reynolds drove, and which contained the important Briggs and the camping out paraphernalia. Away they went over the withered grass, and pursuing no trail; for indeed in No-Man's

Land, into which they were about to enter, there were no trails. In the old days, doubtless, this wild part of the country could tell of many a bloody tale of Indian warfare, stranger than fiction generally furnishes us with. But now this land lay silent and lonely: in its very sense of the limitless it was pathetic. What a great power this civilisation of ours must have been to subdue and rob this "Great American Desert" of its natural denizens, and change the natural order of things, until all that is left to give these prairies a fitting life is a few broken bands of predatory Indians, and a few head of antelope. But this is, comparatively speaking, one of the wild, unknown spots, and to a certain extent the home of primitive Nature; and there is always a charm about that which has a sense of wildness, and where human life is not.

Away they rattle; now, down the steep banks of some coulee; then, toiling up the opposite bank; again, bowling along over a lawn-like stretch of prairie; but ever with a sharp look out for badger holes and such like dangers.

At noon they drive into Many Berries Creek, and down a steep incline into a thick clump of cottonwood trees and bastard-maple. Then what a merry time of it they had to be sure, when the horses had been picketed out, and they set about getting the lunch ready. It perhaps did not matter a great deal after all, if Jack Holmes and a certain young

lady did keep them waiting some considerable time for a kettleful of water—it was a joint-stock affair—for time was not so remarkably precious just then. True, it might have mattered had they both been drowned (and such a catastrophe was very nearly happening). For when they went down to dip the kettle they both kept a firm hold of it, and the result was that they each took a step into the shelving pool, but arrested further progress just in time. Then, on going up the bank, they spilt that kettle of water between them, and had to go down again to the pool to repeat their innocent little comedy. True to the old adage that too many cooks spoil the broth, when they all tried to be of some assistance in getting lunch ready, the result was a most delightful confusion. Perhaps the one who contributed most to this state of affairs was Cousin Ned, who kept continually getting in every one's way, and shifting things about after they were put in proper order, under the delusion that he was rendering invaluable assistance. In fact, when the kettle had boiled, the watchful Briggs stopped him in the act of putting a large handful of salt into it, under the impression that it was sugar, and that he was about to sweeten the tea. After this, Briggs kept one eye on the provisions and another on Mr. Terry, who, somewhat over-awed by the air of importance and mystery that Briggs assumed for the occasion, took a back seat for some little time. But a little later, to keep up the

delusion of his usefulness, he blunted a carving-knife in attempting to open a can of tomatoes with it. Then the lynx-eyed Briggs offered him a can-opener, and it was the greatest blow of all to him ; for Ned never having seen or heard of such a thing in his life before, stared at it with a stony irrecognition. This was indeed a triumph to Briggs.

Mrs. Tredennis for a few days before the start did not seem to be in the best of spirits. It was noticed that she was rather pale and had a listless air ; and then a sudden change came over her. At first her manner towards Travers, when he had found it positively necessary to talk to her, had been of a frank and kindly character ; she asked his advice in regard to certain preparations, and acted upon his suggestions. And then her manner suddenly changed ; for while she did not actually seem to avoid him, there was a trace of petulance in her manner that accorded but strangely with one of her even temperament. Dick thought he must have done something that had given her offence ; for her bearing towards him was that of one who has suffered some slight and strives to conceal it, but cannot. But on this particular day nothing but good-will and harmony prevailed. Their appetites were sharpened by the ride and the keen prairie air, and they made a hearty meal. Then, after the men had assisted in clearing away, and Cousin Ned succeeded in breaking a couple of plates (still under the delusion that he was rendering invaluable

assistance), the men fed their horses—they were cool now—and had a smoke. Then stow away and hitch up again, and away over the rolling prairie.

And now the scenery became of a more broken and wilder character, and there were striking patches of what was known as "Bad Lands." That is, small strips of country on which nothing grew, and from which rose great cone-like mounds of mud or sand, which sparkled with a mica-like substance.

When Tredennis had been riding on ahead with Dick, they had come right on to a band of antelope; for a second the timid, startled creatures stood stock still with craned necks; one of them even took a few steps forward: for the antelope is an inquisitive animal, and his curiosity often costs him dearly. Quick as thought, Tredennis lifted his rifle from across the horn of his saddle on which it rested, and aimed at the foremost animal—ping! went his rifle, and in another second it dropped like a stone.

"Antelope steak for supper," he cried, as he jumped down and bled it.

Towards evening they pulled down into a beautifully wooded coulee, and selecting a shady, sheltered nook, prepared to camp for the night.

Soon the horses were picketed and attended to; three good-sized tents were pitched; a huge fire was burning cheerily, and Briggs was cooking savoury venison steaks upon it. However, the novelty and pride of his position were marred by the vision of

Cousin Ned, ransacking and upsetting various articles of a delicate and perishable nature in a huge wicker basket, in a vain attempt to find some culinary article, the nature of which, and the purpose for which it was wanted, Ned having promptly forgotten as soon as he had begun his search.

Travers had gone down to the bed of the creek, by an old buffalo pad, to where there was a large water-hole ; and in the sand of the creek he saw something that for the second startled him, and made him glance sharply around. It was the tracks of a huge bear—great, squat tracks, and the soft, pliant sand had taken a true and distinct impression of the foot. It had evidently been travelling down the creek ; but to tell within a day or two when it had gone down, would have required an Indian or an Australian black-tracker to decide. Travers filled the water pails he had taken down with him, and took them up again to the camp ; he said nothing to the others of what he had seen, but taking Tredennis aside, he told him about the tracks. The upshot of it was, that the latter, arming Reynolds and Dick with an express rifle apiece, started down the creek on the tracks of the bear. But after following them up on horseback for a couple of miles or so, they concluded to turn. At least there was no danger of Bruin lurking in their immediate vicinity and stampeding their horses. The ladies were shown the tracks of the “real, live bear” ; and Cousin Ned, having been assured that it

was all nonsense about the inconvenient habits bears have of prowling round at midnight with criminal intent, entering tents they have no business to, and pulling the clothes off the sleepers, they sat down to supper.

It was one of the pleasantest of meals; they all sat around on the ground just as they pleased. There was no sitting below the salt. Reynolds, the silent, with his quiet, dry humour, was taken in hand by the elder of the two Dalton girls—whom at first he had regarded with considerable awe—and under her spell actually began to enjoy himself. There were no mosquitoes or flies to annoy them now, the touch of frost in the evenings had banished them. And now it began to get cold. In the world's eternal dome the stars gleamed out clearly and sharply. They had donned their warmest upper garments, and began to think that the Scot was a pretty sensible fellow after all, when he had said they would require them. They built a huge fire and sat round it; then one of the Dalton girls produced a violin case and proved herself an accomplished musician; and to the intense astonishment of Briggs, Cousin Ned developed a very fine tenor voice. Briggs came to the conclusion that Providence always furnished a man with some compensating quality, no matter what his defects were. Then ensued a veritable open-air concert. The fire burned up, and the shadows under the great cottonwood trees took on an inky blackness. The men

enjoyed their pipes as they seldom did. Then the elder of the two girls discovered that, as Reynolds himself admitted, he did play "a little now and again." Then, of course, he must needs play.

He modestly took the violin, and, lo! they experienced a revelation: it was the picturesque element of old Canada.

Now it was some voyageur's song, sung by some musical French Canadian as he sat in the bow of a birch canoe, paddle in hand, and watched with a keen, unwavering eye the approaching rapids. And then there came a change. Surely it was a trapper's or a lumberer's camp in the dark pine woods. How the bright, ruddy light from the open shanty windows gleamed out upon the dark night and across the winter's snow, until it sparkled like a sheet of silver. And look, and listen! There is a motley crew inside, mostly dark-haired and dark-eyed. Perhaps there is among them a hint of Indian blood. Some are volatile and excitable, hinting at a Gallic origin. Some wear great red stockings reaching over the knees, and buckskin shirts covered with a mosaic of gaudy bead-work, and with heavy drooping fringes. They are dancing some infectious fantasia. Now it is the Red River jig. How they abandon themselves to it, and how their feet twinkle! Now it is that indescribable musical joke without beginning or ending—the Arkansaw Traveller—with its catching, foot-stirring melody. There is an air of abandon, barbarism and freedom, permeated with a

picturesqueness about the whole scene, that is positively fascinating.

The music stops, and the picture vanishes.

It was Mrs. Tredennis who first broke the silence. Strangely enough, she spoke of something that had just been running in the minds of the others.

But, perhaps after all, that is not strange which is always happening.

"Tom," she said to her husband, "we must not go back to England, without getting a glimpse of picturesque Canada. The prairies are all very well, but we must see a trader's post and a lumberer's camp."

Then there was another interruption, something very like the angry snarl of a wild animal rose in the stillness that ensued after Mrs. Tredennis's speech. What about that bear whose tracks they had seen going down the creek? Briggs, who had been lying somewhat outside the circle, jumped in alarm to his feet, and with an exclamation of fear.

But it was only his *bête noir*, Cousin Ned, who had fallen asleep; and with his head hanging backwards over a log, seemed to be inviting death by strangulation.

"Some one put the poor boy to bed," said Mrs. Tredennis, with a mock air of tenderness in her voice, and the innate love of fun betraying itself in her speech.

No sooner said than done. Tredennis and Dick seized the little man by the head and heels, and

carried him, remonstrating and struggling, to the tent, where they deposited him on his roll of bedding, amid the laughter and "good-nights" of the rest of the party.

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CHAPTER XIV.

WHERE THE DEVIL AMUSES HIMSELF.

THEY camped in that sheltered nook for a couple of days. Tredennis, and Cousin Ned getting some good shooting, and the ladies never seeming tired of exploring the cavern-like recesses of the creek bottom under the over-hanging cut-banks, roofed in with the dense tangle of boughs and creepers. They had discovered an Indian grave; and in a coulee away out on the open prairie between two creeks—which explained why it had escaped the prairie fires—they came upon a striking memento of the Wild West.

There stood the wreck of a waggon from which two of the wheels had dropped, and tilted in air. It was the very scare-crow of a waggon; for its loosened boards, which were bleached to a dingy brown, flapped eerily in the wind, and they were literally riddled with bullets. The tragic tale pertaining to it was plain as an open book. For near it lay a couple of incomplete skeletons, and the barrel and stock of an

old rifle ; under the waggon and around it were strewed the empty shells of cartridges.

" Better sit down a little way off, and let me look round," said Travers, to Mrs. Tredennis and the two girls, when he saw the ghastly remains of what had once been human beings.

They moved a little distance off, and sat down ; but still turned to look upon the pathetic sight, as if fascinated by such a striking picture from the storehouse of the past. It was a strange thing to think, that probably the last eyes of a white man who had gazed upon the scene of this tragedy, had been the dying eyes of these poor emblems of mortality themselves. As with grim determination, not perhaps unmixed with a pang of agony—for life is sweet—they " stood off," the circling, yelling red fiends, until they sank mortally wounded.

Travers looked around him.

" The Indians, of course, must have surrounded them ;" he said. " I think there is one spot in particular where they must have got in their work."

He went to a little hillock, covered with sage-bush, about a hundred yards off. And behind it was, as he had thought, a pile of empty cartridge shells.

" They were probably traders," Dick continued, " no matter what they sold—it might have been whisky or blankets, for all one can tell—but they were not the first victims of those Indians, who must have got their weapons and cartridges from some-

where other than a trading post. Indians don't generally have Winchesters."

"I should like to sketch that waggon," Mrs. Tredennis remarked, looking at it with a contemplative air; "there is such an air of suggestion about the whole scene."

Her eyes turned from it and met those of Dick who was watching her curiously. He had spoken but little to her these last few days.

"You seem to have a fancy for anything of this nature," he remarked, quietly, with a forced calmness in his voice; and as if what he said were only intended for her ears. He looked into her eyes as he continued. "A vivisectionist talks of a 'beautiful' operation, just as you seem to enjoy anything that savours of a premature and unnatural death."

One of the girls looked up sharply. Was it grim humour or some partially revealed sentiment, that this handsome, sad-eyed cynic indulged in? Mrs. Tredennis turned her face away from him, but made no reply to this strange speech, divining the sentiments that had actuated it. But it was evident from her quiet, but thoughtful, demeanour on the walk back to camp, that his words had cut her deeply.

That evening there was a cold leaden hue in the sky, and the stars did not shine out as brightly as usual, which evidently caused Reynolds not a little uneasiness. But then, as he remarked to Cousin Ned, when asked by that individual what it meant,

"Not being a prophet, he could not exactly say. If anything at all, it meant snow." For the changes in these latitudes are so sudden, and come on with so little warning, that it is impossible even for an Indian to forecast a change until it has regularly set in. To those who have been accustomed to the steady-going, old-fashioned, jog-trot style of the British climate, where one can forecast with tolerable accuracy twenty-four hours beforehand what sort of weather one is to enjoy, such a condition of things is difficult to understand. In nine cases out of ten, the resident in the North-West Territories from the Old World, in spite of many lessons, will not understand, and is caught in the lurch.

Next morning, in spite of the ominous greyness in the northern sky, the weather was pleasant and sunny enough, and the party was evidently inclined to chaff Reynolds, in regard to his prognostications of the night before.

"I am inclined to think you are a Scotsman, and take after MacMillan," said Mrs. Tredennis, merrily. "The law of association is too strong to permit of my enjoyment being damped by anticipating such a contingency as a snow-storm."

"Blizzard," quietly corrected Reynolds. "My parents were Scotch, and I don't want to establish a reputation as a croaker; but I should not advise you to go out riding very far, without strapping on your great-coat behind the saddle. I have seen many

a blizzard long before this time of the year. I've got to follow up some tracks I noticed yesterday going eastward—some horses we lost a couple of months ago I wouldn't wonder—but I know I'm not going out without mocassins, mitts, and fur cap in my wallets."

Tredennis and Cousin Ned had arranged to go back north a few miles on foot, to look for a band of antelope they had seen on the previous day. Mrs. Tredennis, taking some sketching materials with her, and the Dalton girls with a well-stocked picnic-basket, and with Jack Holmes officiating as driver, were to take the light spring-waggon and go towards Many Berries Creek. Briggs was to remain in camp, an arrangement which suited that gentleman only too well, as he declared in confidence to Reynolds, that it took at least a couple of hours every morning to straighten up things in camp, after Cousin Ned had been seized with one of his fits of making himself "generally useful" the night before. Dick, who had declined the invitation of Tredennis, and Cousin Ned to go out shooting with them, was about to accompany Reynolds, and follow up the tracks of the strange horses, when Tredennis stopped him.

"I say, Travers, by Jove, you know, this is too bad!" remarked the worthy Tom. "You can hunt horses any time. We came out for a picnic; let the horses go. If you can't come out shooting with Terry and me, you ought at least to accompany the ladies.

Fancy poor Holmes, an unprotected male, alone with three of them! You ought to stand by a comrade better than that. Oblige me, like a good fellow, by going with them. I'm always afraid Mrs. Tredennis or the girls, will be straying away in that broken country and losing themselves."

"I believe you're right," said Dick; "but I have such a poor opinion of myself in a social capacity, that I always think I'm better out of the way."

"Nonsense, man; you make too little of yourself. I know that Mrs. Tredennis for one will be glad to have you with her; she values very highly your opinion upon art—a thing that I know as much about as it knows about me—and you might be in a position to render her some assistance. Well—until dinner time."

Honest Tom, surely you are artless; for even that art which you have of rendering others happy, strangers though they be to you, is no art, for it is simply your natural self—that quality which is superior to wealth or birth, and stamps Nature's gentleman.

Travers rode on after the light spring-waggon, and was received with a running fire of banter by the girls.

"I knew he could not stay away," said one.

"I thought he was reserving himself as a pleasant surprise," said the other.

But there was a third, who, whatever she may have thought, betrayed no recognition of his presence.

"Let us go south instead of west," said Mrs. Tredennis at length, "into that country which must necessarily be delightful, since they call it 'The Bad Lands': there is infinite suggestion about the name. Do you think you could pilot us there, Mr. Travers?"

"I think I could, Mrs. Tredennis, if you wouldn't mind being jolted a little in the waggon. I'll go ahead and pick out the way. There's a queer corner several miles south of this that I think would interest you. 'The Devil's Playground,' I call it. Look out for the springs of the waggon, Jack!"

Away they rattled down the creek until they came to the coulee, which came in from the south; they crossed the creek and went up it; then for three or four miles they gradually ascended a bench or inclined plane. This was, comparatively speaking, easy work; then the country became more broken again.

Suddenly, without any warning, they came to the brink of a great gulch, and a weird sight burst upon them. Mrs. Tredennis uttered an exclamation of delight and wonder, and, with parted lips and sparkling eyes, took in the scene with the appreciation that only an artistic temperament can feel. Some three or four hundred feet beneath them, a great valley stretched from east to west. No green banks or bosky undergrowth fringed its bottom; but great unseemly scarred and jagged sides of chocolate-

coloured clay, intersected by jet black seams and yellow and pink, with here and there patches of alkali snowing dazzling white as the wintry sun shone upon it. Huge pillar-like masses of clay rose like gigantic mushrooms from the bed of the valley: some were perfectly round and tapered towards their summits, resembling sugar-loaves, so sprinkled were they by a gleaming mica-like substance; and others again were ungainly and bulbous shaped. Some resembled huge frogs, or uncouth antediluvian monsters. The valley, with its gaudy colouring, chocolate-coloured background, and grey, wintry sky shining upon it, resembled the playground of a race of Titans, who, after modelling all manner of grotesque and weird imaginings in clay, and baking and painting them with the pigments from the crucible of mother Nature, had suddenly deserted it, and left their uncouth playthings behind them to astonish a new race of beings. It required no stretch of imagination to name these shapes. There was a group of toad-stools—gigantic ones truly, but still toad-stools. And there, hard by, was a wicked and leering old toad, green with age. Here was a winged dragon; and there an excrescence resembling some loathly saurian, with its mouth all agape, crawling out of a slimy pool. There was an animal resembling an elephant or a dinotherium; and here, surely, was a bird which resembled the extinct moa, the giant frame of which is found on the Australian coast. It

was a weird playground, and suggested weirder thoughts.

For a few minutes no one spoke. Truly, when man is face to face with Nature's wonders, he realises how commonplace and puny, after all, are the greatest of man's works. The pyramids and the sphinx, set down on this Titan's playground, would only have added a little variety to this collection of monstrosities.

"It is difficult to express one's thoughts properly with regard to such a scene," Mrs. Tredennis said slowly, as she gazed with a thoughtful look upon the *outré* sight. "If one attempted to put these colours on canvas, the public would resent it as an insult to their intelligence, and the critics would say I had gone mad. A Dorè might make a sketch of it in some neutral tints, and call it by some fanciful name, such as 'The Gateway of the Inferno,' or 'A Landscape from another World,' and it might excite the passing love of the world in the wonderful. But no one would believe for an instant that such a place ever existed. With all due deference to Dorè for having mentioned his name in connection with my intentions, I think I should like a memento of this place. Mr. Holmes, if you will let me get off here, you can drive on to where you like; and you can either pick me up on your way back, or, if I finish this sketch in time, I shall come on to where you are camped."

There was some demur about this ; but as a slight wind had sprung up, which was not exactly mild, and as they could not keep the horses long in it on that exposed plateau, it was arranged that Jack Holmes and the girls should continue their course along the brow of the hillside, then, descending it, camp on the bottom, near a spot where there was a clump of timber. They had heard of a place where there was a fossilised bank of shells somewhere in the neighbourhood, and they would have a search for it, and try to secure some specimens. Mrs. Tredennis alighted, and they handed out her sketching materials. Dick Travers, who could not in common politeness leave, was getting his picket-rope out of the waggon, when Mrs. Tredennis stopped him, saying that he had better pilot the others down to the bottom first, and picket out his horse with theirs. Besides, they might not be able to discover the fossils without his help. She did not mind being left alone ; her sketch would soon be finished. She would follow up the waggon tracks, and perhaps after all, she might be in time to join them at lunch, although it was immaterial whether she got any or not.

Whatever the others thought about the ready acquiescence of Dick to this proposal, he neither knew nor cared. He only felt that he would not have pressed his services upon her just then for the sake of the good opinion of the world at large ; but still he felt unaccountably piqued. Without further parley,

he rode on ahead of the waggon, and called on them to follow him. They then descended a steep incline, and bowling over a mile or two of hard, dry clay, soon arrived at the clump of wolf-willow and maple which fringed the creek at the mouth of the "Bad Valley," as it was called. They unhitched, and picketing out the horses on a patch of grass, prepared to start out in quest of the bank of shells.

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CHAPTER XV.

HIS SATANIC MAJESTY MAKES A MOVE.

BY this time a rather remarkable change had come over the weather. The sky now assumed a dull, leaden hue ; and away to the north there was an ominous shadow, that made one think of winter to look at it, Dick did not altogether like the look of that shadow. Miss Dalton, who was a pretty, sensible, and agreeable girl, was waiting for him to be her companion to that great mudbank where the fossilised remains of strange shells and stranger fish (in that they seemed to be all body and no head) of a bygone and forgotten age, held out a veritable museum of wonders. She was a girl that any man might have been proud to walk alongside of ; in her smart grey tailor-made dress and natty hat, she was a rare anomaly in that wild No-Man's Land. But Dick, in spite of himself, thought of something else ; he pictured some one sitting all alone up the valley on the brow of the cliff, sketching the scene beneath her. Truly, she had alienated his sympathy by her heartless conduct in the past ; but then, he had at one

time loved her, and he could not altogether crush the remembrance of that love. He had cursed himself over and over again for his folly, in not being able to attain that state of mind in which he might be able to look upon her with utter indifference, if not with contempt. But still, he was one of these weak mortals, that strong-minded persons—who are blessed in that they can sacrifice heart to head when required—designate as one of the "soft ones;" and now he was about to sacrifice the promptings of prudence to his consideration for others. Poor Dick, he was perfectly sincere.

"I don't like the look of that sky," he remarked; "I am very sorry I can't go with you, for I think I shall have to go back and look after Mrs. Tredennis: one can get so easily lost in that broken country. I should not have left her, no matter what she said. You can't miss the bank of fossils if you follow right down this side of the creek; in the meantime, I'm afraid I must leave you."

"And won't you take anybody with you?" asked the fair girl, looking upon him with an engaging entreaty that would have settled the matter with most men right away. Then, seeing him hesitate, her mood changed, and she added, as the light somewhat left her eyes, and the smile died upon her lips, but still pleasantly, "Or, no, perhaps I'd better turn fossil-hunter, five is an awkward number for a picnic, anyhow."



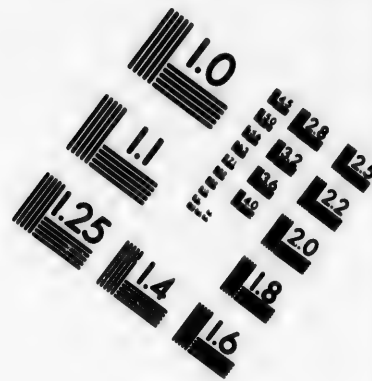
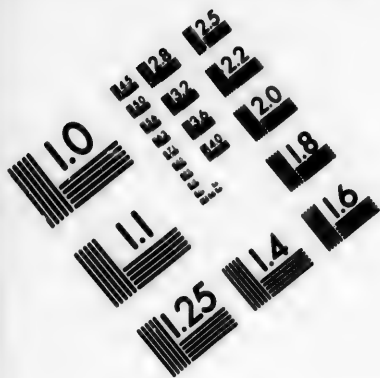
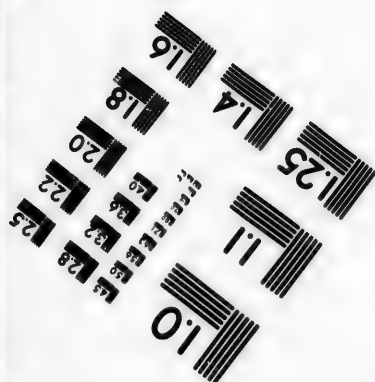
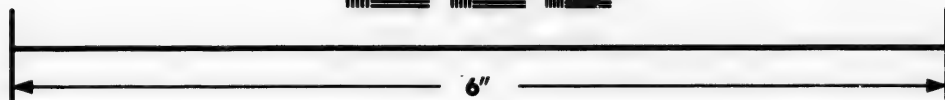
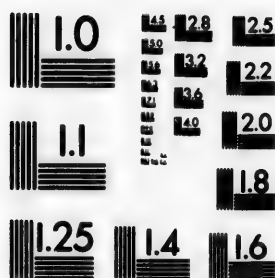


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"Nonsense," laughed Dick, "I simply can't see the force of dragging you away up that coulee again. Anyhow, I'm going to climb the cut-bank to avoid going away round by the stony bench. I should not advise any of you to wander too far away. I very much fear there is some ugly change in the weather brewing. *Au revoir*, till lunch time anyhow."

"*Au revoir*," they shouted in chorus, and instinctively looked after the spare, but well-knit figure of the man that somehow every one felt so much attracted to, but still whom they could but imperfectly understand. In their minds was no prescience of approaching evil. And it was a coincidence, pure and simple, in accordance with after events, that when he got to the ridge in sight of the series of clay terraces he should look back and wave his hand to them. There was a certain young lady there, who was suddenly seized with an almost irresistible impulse to kiss her hand to him in return ; but she checked herself in time, and wondered what had possessed her to think of such a thing, and speculated on her state of mind if she had committed such a rash act. A few days afterwards, she was sorry that she stifled in its birth a natural and kindly, if an unorthodox action.

Dick climbed the series of ridges ; they were neither dangerous nor difficult just there, and again stood on the brow of the cliff overlooking the valley. He went on to where he had left Mrs. Tredennis, and looked

all along for her, but she was nowhere to be seen. She must have gone in search of some new point of vantage from which to sketch the Devil's Playground. Travers followed along the brow of the cliff for a mile or so, to a place where a series of shelving terraces sloped in a broken and irregular way towards the valley again. It was some time before he discovered whom he was in quest of; she was perched on one of the terraces overhanging a deep, broken, coulee a few hundred yards or so from where he stood: how she got there puzzled him. He started off to reach her on one of these irregular terraces; but when he came to within speaking distance of her, he discovered he had taken the wrong one, and stood directly above her. A drop of several feet, and a slide down a soft face of clay, and he was directly behind her. She was sketching intently, and evidently was unaware of his approach. She had sketched with a bold sweeping stroke the wildly irregular and grotesque features of the scene; but now her eyes rested on it, as if she were somewhat at a loss to treat such a subject. Dick was unwilling to disturb her, and watched her, keeping perfectly still. Suddenly, with a start, she turned round and gazed full upon him with almost a look of fear in her eyes, though it was evident she strove to conceal any surprise.

"I did not expect you back," she said, hurriedly, before Dick could apologise for having disturbed her

though for the life of him he could not tell how it was she had suddenly divined his presence. She continued—

“Do you know, a strange thing has happened. I neither saw nor heard you, but suddenly you came into my thoughts, and I felt somehow that you were near me ; I turned round and found it was so. Don't you think it was more than a coincidence ?”

Her lips were parted, and her eyes were eager and fixed upon his. She was evidently ill at ease about something, and strove to divert the personal nature of the conversation.

“Not so very strange after all,” he said. “It is simply an unexplored science : mind-reading is the outcome of it, which might explain the phenomena ; they say that people of a peculiar temperament have the power to a greater or less degree. It seems to be a highly impressionable and sensitive condition of the brain and nerves—abnormally developed perceptive faculties, or whatever you may choose to call it. I have told the numbers on a bank-note held by another man five times out of six myself. It sounds like nonsense to some people. But the existence of the phenomenon is an acknowledged fact, governed by natural laws all the same.”

“You make me almost afraid of you,” she said, with a slight laugh. “I can understand now, how it was that I was almost afraid to think at times when you were near me.”

"Then you admit that the past sometimes troubles you?" he rejoined, seating himself on a boulder of clay near to her, and regarding her curiously. Her face flushed slightly, as she met his eyes; but with the air of one who has nothing to fear or to conceal, she said—

"Do you think it fair or manly to tax me like this? I have told you before, that it were better to let things remain as they are. To resurrect the past is only to make matters worse for both you and me: and oh, I know what you must have thought of me; it is useless, I fear, to expect that you should think otherwise. But for pity's sake do not talk of the past!"

She said this almost piteously; but there was that light in her eyes, and on her face, that he had seen there on a former occasion, and which was difficult to reconcile with a consciousness of wrong-doing. It was rather a look of nobility: that of one who would sooner suffer misrepresentation and shame in the sight of those whose good opinion she most valued, rather than that which would remove all stigma from her, but expose her to a greater evil. He was now conscious of some hidden truth—on a former occasion its existence had suggested itself to him; now, he was sure of it, and he regarded her with the light of a great trouble in his eyes, which was devoid of the anger that he had felt before. She returned his gaze calmly. Then, slowly her eyes dropped before his, as

she said in a voice that, though low and kindly, was not altogether steady—

"Let us talk of something else, Dick. It's stupid of us to be always skating on the verge of a quarrel."

Across the leaden-hued sky a ray of sickly sunlight fell; it shot across the gloomy valley, and lighting up the face of the loathly saurian, had the effect of making that reptile look as if it were in a condition bordering on lugubriousness. It also made the wicked-looking old toad leer more horribly than ever. So sudden and complete was the illusion that Mrs. Tredennis, thinking it might be only a trick of her own fertile imagination, looked at her companion to observe if he had also noticed it. His eyes met her's and they both laughed.

"Are they not a pretty pair?" he asked, as if divinining her thoughts, "I don't think I ever saw such a gruesome spot in all my life. One could imagine such a place set aside for the enactment of some dark retributive act from the night side of mundane things."

"To hear you talk," she rejoined, smilingly, "one would think you anticipated trouble. I hope you have no awkward presentiment that we two have got to be the principal actors in such a tragedy as you evidently think about. How cold it has got all of a sudden!"

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A gust of wind swept over their heads, and stirred

up the fine alkali dust in the valley beneath them. It rose in pillar-like clouds, until it assumed the appearance of steam ascending from some unseen caldron. Mrs. Tredennis stopped sketching for a minute, and looked wonderingly at the changing scene; much in the same way as she would have looked at a child, who had betrayed a sudden fit of temper. She was a charming contrast this young woman, with her handsome and trim figure shown to its best advantage by a faultless taste, and with the delicate bloom of health on her cheek, and its lustre in her eyes. She would have made a striking picture, posed against one of these grotesqueries as a foil to her beauty. Then for a while their conversation hinged on natural phenomena of a like nature, and which Travers had seen in South America; and so interesting evidently did the conversation become, that Mrs. Tredennis was in danger of neglecting her sketch.

Ss-w-iss!

A chill gust of wind shrilled over their heads; and a drear shadow enveloped the valley in a ghostly twilight. Then there was a sobbing and sighing in the air, and an ominous murmur like that which precedes a cyclone, ere it comes raving and crashing through the far Australian forest. How cold it had grown all of a sudden!

Travers sprung to his feet as a feathery flake of snow melted on his cheek. His companion shivered

and closed her sketch-book, but betrayed no uneasiness whatever.

"Snow!" cried Dick, now thoroughly alarmed, for he knew what that meant. "We must get out of here as quickly as possible. I am to blame for not having made you leave this before. I wonder if this terrace runs into the bench again; if so we might follow it right up; once there we would be safer, and travelling would be easier."

"Look eastward," Mrs. Tredennis said, "it seems to run into the plateau again. Let us try it, anyhow. You need not blame yourself, I alone am to blame. Anyhow, I want you to try this way of reaching the top, and if we have to turn again the fault will have been mine."

She was perfectly cool and collected; indeed, much more so than he was. He attributed it to her ignorance of what such a change meant in these parts. But here he wronged her; for she had read of how men had been lost and frozen to death on their way from their dwelling-houses to the horse-stable; and how children had been overtaken by these same blizzards, and perished miserably on their way to school.

They hurried along the shelving terrace, and as they went, the feathery flakes of snow fell thicker, and more quickly around them; they could not see the valley beneath, but as yet the overhanging terrace behind, somewhat protected them from the keen wind that was blowing. In less than five minutes there

was a carpet of snow under their feet ; and despite the sheltering cliff, it was impossible to see more than a few paces ahead of them. Over their heads they could see the snow scurrying along at a pitiless, fearful rate. They knew it would be impossible for any living thing to exist on that exposed plateau. Suddenly they were shut in by semi-darkness. It grew icy cold as the wind dashed the half frozen snow against their hands and cheeks ; and as it was difficult to hear each other speak by reason of the noise of the wind, and the hissing of the blizzard, they were in a sorry plight.

Now, on the level prairie, where there is nothing to offer any obstruction to the fury of the wind and snow, one of the peculiar features of the blizzard is the almost utter absence of all sound. A blizzard is a terribly real, but a ghostly thing ; for on the open prairie one seems struggling with an invisible force that is silent as the grave. But here, in this wildly irregular and honeycombed country, the elements broke and eddied round the great pillars of clay as if the devil were playing in a shrill, minor key on a species of pan-pipes.

Instinctively she had held out her hand to him, and he had taken it and led her along impassively. Suddenly they drew back in fear—the terrace had suddenly broken off, part of it had slid away from the cliff alongside, and the continuation of the terrace was probably far beneath them. To reach it the

descent would be almost perpendicular, which would necessitate a cool head and firm nerves. Dick paused non-plussed ; but Mrs. Tredennis caught him by the arm, and placing her mouth close to his ear, said in a quiet, steady voice—

"I am not afraid to go down there, besides, I have got this stick, and if you give me your hand I think we could manage it. We must get to better shelter than we have here, anyhow."

Her eyes were perfectly calm and untroubled despite the danger in which they were, and there was no murmur or complaint upon her lips. The child-like confidence she seemed to place in him, somewhat touched and gave him courage.

"All right ;" he shouted back, "there can be no danger if you only clasp your hands round this belt of mine, and brace yourself so, against the side of the cliff.—Now, then !"

There was no time to lose, he knew that every minute's delay meant danger ; besides, they were both becoming chilled and less capable of performing a feat such as they now proposed to do.

They stepped over the brink ; Dick planted his feet firmly on the now somewhat slippery clay. He had taken off a spur, and grasping it firmly in one hand, had dug the neck securely into the wall of earth ; it helped to steady him. But the wall-like bank was more difficult to maintain a footing on than they had bargained for ; as if they had suddenly shot over

some slippery glacier on an Alpine peak, they slid down it at a sickening rate. If they should strike now one of those narrow terraces, by reason of the impetus which they had gained, they would go clean over it, on to what it was horrible to think. There was only one thing to be done. Mrs. Tredennis was worse than a dead weight to him, and her slim ankle boots offered no resistance to the soft slippery bank. Dick looked into the face of Mrs. Tredennis, and though there was nothing like panic or fear in it, he saw she realised the situation. In another second she had loosened her hold on his belt, and was about to throw herself from him when he divined her purpose. With one supreme effort he wound his arm round her waist, and lifting her sheer off her feet rested her against his right side. He dug his feet firmly into the clay with the energy of despair, and braced himself against the precipitous wall. His increased weight steadied him, and he found that his feet could offer a greater resistance to the treacherous clay, and his impetus was lessened. In another minute his feet struck a narrow platform, and throwing himself against it he strained every nerve in his body to prevent their going over. In another second they knew that they were saved, from one horrible death at least.

Then Dick released his grip upon Mrs. Tredennis, but still held her firmly by one hand. Her face was somewhat pale, and her eyes were strangely bright ;

but there was nothing approaching to fear in them. It was only when she peered over the edge of the terrace on which they crouched, and saw the misty depth beneath them, that she realised from what she had escaped.

There was something in her conduct that Dick could not reconcile with his late estimate of her. She had, he believed, in the past sacrificed her love of him—such as it must have been—to worldly considerations. But still, when they were slipping down that bank together she had not hesitated to release her hold on him—though it meant certain death to her—in order that she might not endanger his chances of escape. Ninety-nine girls in a hundred, he told himself, in a similar situation, even if they had possessed the presence of mind, would have considered their own safety first. That she was ready to sacrifice her own life for his, was a revelation, and enigmatical.

When Dick spoke to her, it was in a different mood from that in which he had addressed her on a previous occasion ; but he infused as much brusqueness into his speech as he could muster.

"You must not do such a foolhardy thing again," he said. "You see your extra weight was a help to me, and not a source of danger as you imagined. We must get out of this. Give me your hand, so. Do you think you could stand on this narrow path without getting dizzy?"

"If you held my hand, Dick," she replied, raising her eyes to his. But she looked away again, as if conscious that she was upon dangerous ground, and which was not in accordance with a certain line of policy she had determined upon.

Faster and faster whirled the blinding snow, hiding everything from their sight; and perhaps it was as well, for now it shut out the abyss that yawned beneath them. Dick raised her from the ground, and taking her by the hand led her along the narrow winding ledge. Sometimes, when the eddying wind caught them, it threatened to dash them from their scanty foothold. At length the terrace got broader, and the wall of the cliff at certain places became hollowed out and overhung them, forming a series of cave-like recesses, which were comparatively sheltered and dry. On the exposed part of the terrace the footing now became so uncertain and difficult that it was dangerous to proceed. At length they came to a recess that seemed to pierce further into the cliff than the others. By this time Mrs. Tredennis showed signs of fatigue, and Dick was afraid that, despite her uncommon pluck, she would play out altogether.

"We had better go in here, and rest," he said. "It is impossible for any one to live on the bench in such a storm, even if it were possible to get there."

She simply bowed her head by way of assent; and he led her into the cave, which was perfectly dry, and which, though cold, seemed a very haven of refuge

from the blinding blizzard. They staggered in, and Mrs. Tredennis, sinking on a low ledge of rocks, buried her face in her hands, and lay for a few moments motionless, as if to recover from the strain of the last terrible thirty minutes.

"Oh, those poor girls!" were the first words she uttered. She never for an instant seemed to consider her own position, doubly perilous as it was; a stranger to have heard her would have thought that she had been guilty of something worse than carelessness, in allowing them to stray into that wilderness. Travers assured her, as well as he might, of the advantages of the place, so far as shelter was concerned, in which he had left Holmes and the two girls. Besides, he knew that the former could be counted upon to act with promptitude and discretion in an emergency.

And still the blizzard raged outside. It was as if a broken avalanche of snow and ice were borne along on the pitiless breath of a hurricane.

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CHAPTER XVI.

A BLIZZARD.

WHEN Dick Travers left the two girls and Holmes, the latter came to the conclusion that the best thing to be done under the circumstances (seeing that two was company and three was none—for the Sage was not above the petty weaknesses of mankind) was to find the fossil ground, and get back to camp as soon as possible. Furthermore, despite his inexperience, Jack did not altogether like the look of the weather ; and he knew that now, since the two young ladies were under his care, if anything happened to them, he was mainly responsible. He knew that Mrs. Tredennis was in the best of hands with Dick.

They followed down the creek and found the bank without much trouble. It proved a veritable store-house of curiosities. They found sea-shells of every variety and pattern, from the homely cockle to a species the like of which, and the existence of, they had never dreamed. As for fish, they were of every shape and size ; the very skin was so wonderfully

preserved that it glistened silvery white and pink. They were gathering some beautiful specimens, culling and discarding others, and keeping up a merry fire of banter the while, when suddenly the Sage called out—

"Hilloa—look there! We must get back to camp as soon as possible. I wonder if Dick has found Mrs. Tredennis? If that isn't a blizzard coming up, then all I have heard about them is nonsense."

He pointed to the north-west. There, surely enough, was a great dark shadow slowly spreading itself over the face of the sky. There was a deadly stillness in the air, and it had grown cold; but in their warm, tweed dresses the girls had not thought much of that

Sssh—w—i—s—h!

On it came; and, despite their light-heartedness and inexperience, it was an ominous and eerie sound. It was the first breath of a wind that suggested the frozen regions of the North; and the change, from even a sickly, watery gleam of sunshine was sudden enough to be startling.

"Give me those shells," said Holmes. He took the pocket-handkerchief containing the fossils from the girls. "Now, if you have ever followed up the otter hounds, imagine that you are at a hunt now. The sooner we get back in camp the better."

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were in no way alarmed. Their idea of a storm was limited at the most to the recollection of an Old-County one ; which, always at its worst, would give those who were caught in it, a few hours at least to place themselves beyond the reach of its fury ; and before the snow would get too deep for a team to travel.

"It seems to me," said Holmes, "that we are in the direct track of the storm, for such I've no doubt that it is. It would be folly to keep the horses down in this hollow ; for if it comes on to snow we will never get them out. It looks clearer to the east : we must travel in that direction. Into the waggon both of you ; we will drive back along the brow of the cliff, where we left Mrs. Tredennis, and with whom Dick doubtless now is, and pick them up. It would be madness to remain here in this strange, broken country ; we should never leave it."

Loth though the two girls were to make a move that might possibly upset the calculations of their companions, and perhaps be the means of missing them, should they descend to this camping ground by some other way ; they nevertheless could see the folly of remaining, in such a dangerous place as the Devil's Playground would prove to be in the event of a storm. Holmes hitched up the horses : they clambered into the waggon, and away they rattled up the dangerous path by which they had descended. Ere they came to the steepest part they alighted,

and it took Holmes all his time to coach the two wiry horses safely on to the bench again.

Ssw—i—sh!

Holmes plied his whip.

Ten minutes more, and they stood on the brink of the hideous gulch.

"Where on earth are they?" he cried, in tones of annoyance, and looking around excitedly.

A sickly ray of sunlight just then shot like a wan meteor from the grey heavens, and piercing the semi-twilight of the gloomy, gruesome valley, rested for a second on the face of the eyeless, loathly saurian, which seemed to grin horribly, and on that of the wicked, leering old toad.

The girls shivered instinctively, as their eyes rested upon them.

"What a wizard's freak!" the elder of the two remarked. "Bunyan or Dante could not have dreamed of a more horrible place. Nature must have meant to embody the idea of a night-mare, when she fashioned this valley."

"Hold the reins, one of you girls." The Sage was forgetting his manners in his excitement; but perhaps the gravity of the position justified dispensing with ceremony just then. He ran to the brow of the cliff, and putting his hands to his lips, gave out the cry of that far-off world—the Australian "Coo-ee!" again, and again. He paused and listened in a state of painful, nervous tension, and scanned

every corner of the valley in sight. But there was no sign of life in that wild spot.

"It's too bad!" cried Holmes, despairingly. "They could hardly have started back to the camp without letting us know of it: but it's just probable they have done so. I don't think it possible that they can be here. Anyhow, it is as much as our lives are worth to stop on this exposed plateau; we must get back to the shelter of Wild Horse Creek—the only clear spot left in the sky is to the east. There's no help for it. Give me the reins. Thanks, now don't alarm yourselves if I give you rather a rough ride."

S—w—i—s—h, hi—sss!

He gave a last despairing look at the ill-fated valley, and groaned aloud in spite of himself.

"Oh, Dick, Dick!" he groaned, under his breath. "I thought that woman would somehow be the death of you in the long run."

He was loyal to his friend; but he admitted at last, what he had striven to banish from his thoughts time and again.

"You must not leave them," cried the elder of the two girls, despairingly. "You shall not leave them like this! Just imagine what they will think of us, when they find that we have driven off and left them."

But, perhaps, after all—for she was only human—there was only one whose good opinion she now valued: for towards the other she experienced a growing feeling of distrust and bitterness.

The younger sister in turn added her appeals.

But Jack Holmes was adamant for once; he turned the horses' heads, and giving them a loose rein, drove over the sloping bench in a manner that was more perilous than pleasant.

Jack Holmes thought—judging by the rather ominous looks of the two girls, that it would be as well that he should justify his action, and said—

“Their only hope is in our being able to bring them help. You must recollect that no one knew exactly where we were going. Had we remained in the valley we would most likely have got snowed in without any likelihood of getting out. Wrap these rugs round you, and lie down in the bottom of the rig, for here it comes!”

And, with a rush that was appalling in its suddenness, the full force of the blizzard was upon them. Luckily their course did not lie in the face of it: for it would have been impossible for any living thing to have made headway against it. It struck them sideways, and the horses staggered and cowered for an instant, and the waggon swayed; but Holmes, plying the whip, and shouting to them at the top of his voice, rallied them. In another second they bounded away at headlong speed down the sloping bench. Perhaps they had not received the full fury of the blizzard as yet, or they would have surely perished on that exposed plateau.

Tally-ho! Yo-icks! The hunting-field in the

Old Country is an exciting place, truly: one wants a spice of danger to give zest to the tameness and insipidity of an advanced and leisured civilisation. But a run for life with a blizzard on a trackless and exposed plateau, to use the vernacular of some of our worthy American cousins—"takes the cake."

Hisss—s—w—i—ssh—

Holmes had slipped on his mitts, and had taken the course of a slight declivity, that became as it descended a slight coullee, which he knew led ultimately towards the great cut-bank and strip of timber in Wild Horse Creek, and which he strove to win. The girls did as they were bid, and lay down in the bottom of the waggon. Holmes bowed his head, and stole an occasional glance in the direction in which they were travelling; but now the scurrying, blinding snow made it impossible to see more than a few yards ahead of him. It was a dangerous ride: the horses knowing by former experiences that they were making for shelter, and, maddened by the stinging, icy blast, tore onwards at headlong speed. Several times the waggon struck sharp boulders of rock which protruded from the ground, and there would be a sharp, sickening concussion: the waggon would sway wildly for a minute or two—would something give, or the waggon capsize? Then it would right itself, rattle onwards on its perilous career again, and they would breath more freely. Sometimes the wind was so strong, and the snow so

blinded and choked him, that Holmes groaned in very agony of spirit, and thought it was all up with him. Then he would think of the two inexperienced and helpless girls who lay huddled in the bottom of the waggon; and the thought would flash across his mind, that their lives depended upon his bearing up. Then, choking and gasping for breath, he would rouse himself to a fresh endeavour.

And now the slight hollow became a coulee; the broken ground, and the snow drifting into it, somewhat impeded their progress; but the two game bronchos plunged gallantly on. Another fifteen minutes of a steady run down a grassy bottom, and Holmes began to wonder if by any chance he had missed Wild Horse Creek, the timber and high cut-bank, when suddenly the horses came to a dead stop. It was the creek; Holmes jumped out and reconnoitered as far as he dared. Finding that he could cross the dry bed of the creek with but little trouble, he climbed into the waggon again, and struggled across with the horses. Then he thought there seemed to be a slight lull in the severity of the storm, and lifting up his head he could see the great, dim outlines of trees looming up ahead of him, like spectres through a mist. He drove the horses through the dense undergrowth and among the trees. The wind seemed to have fallen somewhat. Suddenly he discovered the cause of it. He was confronted by a great wall of clay, and could dis-

cern a black seam running through it, which he knew was coal.

"It is Wild Horse Creek, anyhow," he cried aloud, regardless as to whether the others could hear him or not. "We can choose a sheltered spot and wait until the blizzard lifts. It cannot be more than a few miles from camp at the most. They are sure to come down the creek in search of us. It would be worse than madness to proceed a foot further at present, for I don't know exactly where we are; and we might only be straying further from camp."

He followed round the foot of the cliff for about a hundred yards or so, and finding a well-sheltered nook, unhitched the horses and tied them up to trees. There was a dense grove of maples close to the cliff, and wheeling the waggon close up to it, and with the aid of a tomahawk, he soon made a tolerably good camping ground. He then lifted out the two girls, and prepared to make the best of things until the storm lifted.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE GRIM TWIN SHADOWS.

IT was the worst blizzard, and lasted longer than any that ever had been known within the memory of man—that is the red man, for the number of years the whites had been in the country could be counted on or 's fingers. The losses, so far as stock was concerned, were bad enough. But as for human life, to many a family that year is fraught with sorrowful memory. For two days had the blizzard raged without intermission, and it was impossible for search parties to organise or venture out after the missing ones. Those who were in comparative safety could only sit inactive by the stove, and chafe over the harrowing knowledge that every minute was increasing the miseries of those who were missing, and lessening the chances of their being found alive.

In the camp, on Wild Horse Creek, which the unlucky picnics had left on that eventful morning, were Tredennis, Cousin Ned, Reynolds, and Briggs; the first named three having been fortunate enough

to make the camp on the approach of the storm. When Tredennis had returned and found that the picnic party had not turned up, he prepared to start right out after them regardless of the storm. But here, Reynolds asserted his superior experience. He pointed out the foolhardiness of the attempt, and showed how the hope of the ultimate recovery of the party depended on them conserving their strength, and being prepared for prolonged exertion as soon as the opportunity permitted. To go out then, would only be to get lost themselves and delay matters still more. Tredennis allowed himself to be influenced, but still chafed over the delay. Being one of those undemonstrative men who suffer in silence, his attempts to control his impatience were piteous to witness.

Ere the storm had attained its height, three Indians, riding and leading pack-horses, rode right on to the camp. They had evidently just come off the open prairie, and were searching as best they could for suitable shelter. It was hard to say whether the Indians, or the white men were the more surprised at thus meeting each other. When the dusky sons of the prairie—they were Cree Indians returning from a horse-stealing expedition, and had *cached* their horses—had satisfied themselves that it was not a Mounted Police camp they had struck, they pitched a tepee, as well as they could, right alongside that of the white man's, with far seeing views of a mercenary

nature. Reynolds, who knew sufficient of the Cree language to be able to converse freely with them, told how that certain of their party were lost, and after conferring with Tredennis, made an arrangement by which, for certain considerations, they should as soon as the blizzard abated, assist them in their search for the missing ones. These intelligent children of Nature straightway drew their snow-shoes from their packs, and started in to construct a couple of spare pairs. It was a revelation to Tredennis, and showed him more plainly than anything could have done, how uncertain the climate was considered by those who knew it best.

All that night, and all next day the blizzard raged. Once Reynolds had gone out to have a look at the horses. But he had not gone five yards from the tents, when he found the force of the blizzard so great that he could not make any headway against it whatever, so, blinded and choking, he returned to the tent.

In the cave on the terrace that overhung the Devil's Playground there was darkness and stillness, while the blizzard raged outside. True, the man and woman who occupied it were for the time being safe ; but still they could not conceal from themselves the fact, that perhaps they had been only saved from a sudden death, to perish miserably by a more painful and lingering one. Travers had explored the several rambling passages that branched from the cave in various directions ; but they all, after winding about,

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ended in a blank wall of clay. He realised then, that they were as completely cut off from all communication with the outside world as it were possible for two persons to be. When he returned to Mrs. Tredennis, he found her sitting on a boulder of clay. She looked up quickly, and as well as she could in the dim light, looked into his eyes. He, somehow, turned uneasily from her, though he tried hard to assume an easy manner. It was she who first broke the silence.

"You have come back to report that we have been caught in a trap," she said, quietly. "You need not be afraid to tell me that. The only thing that troubles me as yet is the thought of those poor girls; in fact, and you need not gainsay it, I was the means of bringing you all here. I seem to bring nothing but misfortune to my friends." She added this speech as if it were an afterthought, and spoke it bitterly. Dick observed that she rubbed her two hands weakly together, as if she had tried to infuse some warmth into them. He sprang to her side.

"You must not risk frost-bite," he said, gently; "give me your hands."

He took her hands between his own (as it is customary to do when frost-bite is feared), and she assented passively. Then he chafed them between his own, until he had infused some degree of warmth into them. He took a warm pair of mitts from his breast—he had forgotten them till now—and drew

them over her hands. "Luckily I took the Scotsman's advice," he remarked. "Now give me your feet."

Tenderly and reverently, as a husband or a brother would have done, he unlaced her ankle boots, and taking them off, made her chafe them, to restore the circulation of the blood. She had held them out to him, one after another. There was no trace of embarrassment, or mock modesty in her manner: she was simple and childlike in her obedience to him. He drew a pair of thick woollen socks over those she wore, and was about to draw a pair of mocassins over them, when she gently put out her hands and prevented him.

"No, Dick," she said, firmly; "if you have adopted precautions that other people laughed at, are you to suffer for them? You shall not rob yourself like this; my feet will be perfectly warm without these mocassins. You must put them on yourself."

And though he demurred, and assured her that, being accustomed to the cold, he had no trouble in keeping his own feet warm, she was firm, and reluctantly he was obliged to remove his own boots and put them on himself. He gently pointed out to her the absurdity of blaming herself for the troubles that, were independent of any human foresight. For a while after this there was silence in the cave. It grew dark, and instinctively they drew nearer to each other.

"You must lie down and try to get some rest," he said at length. "Take this coat and put it under your head. No, no,"— she had made a quick gesture of dissent—"what I want is a good walk up and down this cave, and then after you have slept I shall lie down, and you can see that I do not sleep too long. You understand we must conserve our strength, for we may need it all before we get out of this."

"If ever we do, Dick," she remarked, simply. It was a strange speech for a young woman to make, and what struck him as odd, was her remarkable indifference as to her fate. She was keenly alive as to the danger in which her friends were, and evidently blamed herself as being the cause of all the trouble. Dick had once got his head examined by a phrenologist, who had told him that he had no fear of death. Surely, she also was of the same condition of mind.

She did as she was told, and lying down on the bare ground—there was no dry grass that they could pull and make a couch of—and placing his coat under her head, prepared to sleep.

Dick sat still for a few minutes, until by her stillness he concluded she was asleep, and then paced the cave backwards and forwards. The exercise did him good, and soon under its influence he acquired some degree of warmth, and felt altogether in a more contented frame of mind. He could now reflect more clearly and dispassionately upon the events of the

last twelve hours. He knew, weigh it in the most favourable light he could, that if the storm lasted—which it had every likelihood of doing—for the next twenty-four hours, they were doomed. For even if he could escape from the terrace by taking chances and dropping from some low point into a snow-drift, his strength by that time would be so reduced, that he could not possibly force his way through the deep snow, and he must necessarily perish in it, worn out by fatigue, hunger, and exposure. He hoped that Holmes, who might have seen the approach of the storm, had driven off the girls to a place of safety, or perhaps, even, have regained the camp. He knew they had not gone without first looking for him. Presuming that Tredennis, Cousin Ned, and Reynolds, had not been themselves caught in the blizzard, how could they possibly find them, seeing that, without snow-shoes, it would be impossible to pick their way across the intervening miles of deep snow? Death, so far as simply ceasing to exist was concerned, did not trouble him. There was no one depending on his existence for daily bread, and there was no one whose heart would be sore and heavy for many a weary day, because he was not. He felt something akin to a cynical pleasure in the very thought of this. No, his had been a wrecked life; one of those chequered existences which, after a strongly marked and hectic career, set in darkness, and are forgotten.

And a woman had wrecked his life (for the loss of

wealth was a questionable loss after all), and surely it was a strange turn in the wheel of Fate, that she who had wrought this evil should perish with him. It was a terrible Nemesis, this living death. In his dark moments, during a reckless career, he had cursed her in his heart. At times thoughts had flashed across his mind—nor is there any royal immunity granted from evil thoughts—which in his more sober moments he had shuddered to think himself capable of. He had thought that to see her perish miserably, even if he had to perish with her, would be some consolation to his outraged sense of honour. Strange, is it not, that such wishes are sometimes gratified? It was a remarkable series of events that had thrown them together again; and though he knew that she deserved his contempt, and that a cool restraint ought to characterise his relations with her, still the old spell was too powerful for him. Like a drunkard, that loathes the chains he himself forges, and which drag him down to death, he had whispered her name with a fond desire, in the same breath as he had cursed her.

“Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife.”—By the sacred and unwritten law of man she ought to have been his. If she had sold herself to Tredennis, and something in her manner told him she had, was the venal law to triumph over a higher code, and prevent him from possessing that, which by God’s law of natural selection ought to have been his? Perhaps

he had been stronger than he had deemed himself. Probably the natural inherent qualities of the man—the true man in him—had been too powerful for these enervating moral thoughts. He was no hero, but he had wrestled manfully with them. As it was, so far as man's social laws were concerned, he had in no way violated them. He could meet that husband, whom he had learned for his many good qualities to respect, with a conscience comparatively clear. Evil thoughts are sinful, says the bigot. No battle, no victory, is the reply.

As to his ultimate fate, it somehow did not interest him as he had imagined it would. He had faced death in various forms before in his wild latter life, and even indulged in a strange vein of speculation on its contingencies. He was not superstitious, but looking upon the impending tragedy in the light of a retributive act of justice, he knew that it was by no means undeserved. If he had never neglected the first principles of honour in his treatment and relations to others, he had sinned in that he had for the last few years neglected, and wasted that life which God had given him. He had not valued it as he ought to have done, and it had suffered in consequence.

“Dick!”

He started, and roused himself from the train of thought which he had been pursuing. Mrs. Tredennis must have been asleep for some hours, and he had hardly noticed how the time passed.

Had she called him? Or was it only one of those realistic tricks, the taxed brain will sometimes play itself. Shipwrecked sailors, men lost in the bush, fever patients, can all tell strange stories regarding such mysterious voices.

But she was awake, and rose to her feet.

"Have you had a good sleep?" he asked her cheerily, by way of breaking the stillness that seemed to be an actual presence in the cave.

"Yes; and now you must lie down. It is not nearly so cold as I thought it would be—what a comfortable pillow this coat makes."

"I am glad you liked it. It is still snowing, but if it stops let me know at once, otherwise, you need not mind cooking breakfast till I get up. There will be lots of time then."

It was a ghastly joke, though its intention was good, and she laughed pleasantly. One not conversant with the circumstances, would never have imagined that it hinged upon a matter of life or death. Dick lay down, and in a few minutes was fast asleep.

When he awoke some hours later there was a dusky twilight in the cave, and he felt somewhat cold and stiff. He saw with but little surprise that the snow still fell heavily, though the extreme force of the wind had somewhat abated. Mrs. Tredennis sat opposite him, and though she regarded him with a smile upon her face, he could see that her eyes were

troubled, and that serious thoughts had left their impress on her face.

"Good-morning," she said, with a quiet humour, "will you have your breakfast now, or will you wait until the cook gets up?"

"Thanks, my appetite is hardly good enough at present," he answered, trying to treat the subject in a like vein, "anyhow, I fear that what we have in the larder has not been improved by the hot weather."

He tried to assume a cheerful appearance, but the sight of her pale face somewhat spoiled the effect. He rose and went to the mouth of the cave.

It is impossible to see more than a few yards," he said; "it would be folly to attempt it; one would be lost before going fifty yards."

He knew that to have attempted to find his way back to the camp, through that blizzard, would simply have been to sacrifice all hope of rescue for her; for he must surely have perished in it. True, it did not matter about his own life, but, considered as a means of saving another—however worthless he might consider that life—it was his duty to avoid risking it. For, contradictory as it might appear, his researches after the truth had taught him that man was a responsible being, and owed a duty towards his fellow-man.

After all, his estimate of the evil he had thought himself capable of, was much in excess of his fitness or inclination to see it accomplished. Pitifully human though he was in many things, he had still a heart

that could find no solace in a selfish and blind revenge.

Morning became mid-day, mid-day became afternoon, and the afternoon rounded towards evening again, and still the snow fell—drifting down in one dense cloud, which shut out even the terrace from sight, and made a twilight in the cave.

As the day wore on, the want of all food, which, during the excitement of the first few hours had not troubled them, now exerted its influence, and they began to feel its overpowering effect upon mind and body. In the morning, to avoid thinking too seriously about the privations that they would experience during the coming day, they had even made painful jokes at their own, and each other's expense; but now, although the spirit was willing, the flesh was weak. Dick could not but admire the spirit of this woman, the very vigour of whose health he knew must cause her to feel the deprivation keenly, but yet, who never for a moment murmured or complained, but tried by her cheerful example to draw the thoughts of her companion from the grim shadows that hovered over them. Still things physical will influence the tendency of one's thoughts, and Dick, partly because the reminiscences were called up vividly to his mind by the circumstances of the present, related to her an experience he once had in Northern Queensland.

It was in '83, in the western portion of the comparatively unknown and unexplored Gulf of Carpentaria country, and Dick was with a party which had been searching for grazing country, and was now on its way down to the coast, to meet a vessel which by prearrangement was to replenish their supplies. They had been travelling on a gusset of land between two great rivers—the Abel Tasman and the Robinson—when the wet season suddenly came on, and they were hemmed in and surrounded by miles of flooded country. It was a terrible mockery; some few weeks before, they had been dying of thirst, but with no lack of food; but now they were in danger of being drowned, and had run out of all rations. The large game had taken to the ranges; the floods would not allow the fish to ascend the now overflowing rivers; the mob of blacks with them—which required considerable watching—had cleaned out the opossums and other small game on the island on which they were; and their small shot had run out. An occasional parrot, and iguana was their scanty bill of fare. Sometimes these, with the addition of a handful of flour, and made into a sort of soup, were all there was to support life for a whole day, amongst some half dozen men. Then they got down to snakes, and after a struggle Dick managed to reconcile himself to them, and even to consider himself lucky when the blacks would bring in an extra big one, and he would get a few extra ounces of its flesh. And then these

too, began to get scarce. The name of one of his comrades was Tom Hume, an Edinburgh man, who had been a sailor in his time; a man of rough exterior, but who was warm-hearted withal. He was an incorrigible wag, and spared nothing and no one when he saw a chance of perpetrating his little joke.

About this time, as starving men will, they began to be irritable and fanciful; starvation and anxiety had done their work, and they began to eye each other suspiciously. Hume, taking advantage of Dick's verdancy, and knowing that that individual must have as a boy read his share of cannibalistic literature: such as the deeds perpetrated by shipwrecked crews, etcetera, called him aside, and imparted the following advice with an air of great secrecy—

"Look here, Dick, I've just got a hint that one of us has to hand in his checks—to save the lives of the others. Now, if I have to hand out the 'long straws and the short,' when I come to you, *take the inside straw!* If old MacLeod is the man who has to be sacrificed, take my advice and don't touch him—starve, like a man, instead. He's so full of Queensland rum, that any one making a meal of him, will acquire such a taste for booze that his life will be a misery to him for ever afterwards."

Dick said in conclusion with a short laugh—

"The best of it was, that judging from the very decided partiality poor Tom had for the product of the sugar-cane, I should have imagined that he

had helped to dispose of worse subjects than poor MacLeod in his time."

It was hardly the sort of story that a man would tell a lady under ordinary circumstances. But on this occasion it answered its purpose ; Mrs. Tredennis laughed in spite of the gruesomeness of the tale.

"And how did you get out of your fix?" she inquired, resting her chin upon her hand, and regarding Dick curiously. "Had you to sacrifice poor old MacLeod?"

"Oh, no," Dick rejoined ; "one of the men swam the river, fetched across a horse, and we had a regular picnic then. And when the ship with our supplies made its appearance in the river, we treated the crew—who had been living on salt pork for six weeks—to what, they declared, were the finest mutton chops they had ever tasted in their lives."

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CHAPTER XVIII.

WHICH WINS?

ONE—two—three days now; an abandonment of hope, and grim Famine setting its seal upon the pinched, weary faces of the two doomed beings in the cave. It was glorious prey for King Death—the young, the strong, the beautiful. He had them so securely that he loved to linger over his work, and note the varying aspects of the unequal struggle, ere the final and grand change came, and the animate became the inanimate. He would insidiously suggest hope, so that they might experience the bitterness of disappointment.

They had borne the first pangs of hunger and exposure, with a cheerfulness that only those who are fashioned in the mould of heroes can assume. As their sufferings became greater, and their waking moments were full of a dull agony; still they never once murmured, but bore up with unwavering fortitude. Only when sleep came in her mercy to them, did they have moments of forgetfulness. Then, their

thoughts strayed away from that forlorn, snow-clad, desolate landscape, and they lived in a land of peace and plenty : of green, sunny fields, and shady meadows—Old-Country meadows, whose beauties only those who have lived and suffered in the dark places of the earth can fully realise.

At times they had the hallucinations which come to those in delirium and the dying : when the present and the immediate past were utterly effaced, and in spirit they lived the happy days of childhood over again. When they saw, and spoke with those dear ones who had long since passed away, without the slightest consciousness of loss. Trivial incidents and scenes of childhood, that had long since been forgotten, came back with all the freshness and vividness of reality. There were no such things as the stern and worldly cares that come with the growing years, to dispel the tender dreams of youth and purity, to dim the speaking eye, and furrow the fair brow. Oh ! the difference, between Now and Then !

And those voices in the air : those phantom voices—whence came they ? Now, it was as if they heard a peal of marriage bells floating in the still air. Now, it was as if they came from the old church on the hilltop, and they were ringing out the dying year and heralding the new. And then, as if with some subtle sense of the irony of fate, they were tolling solemnly, sadly, and slowly, as if for the dead. Music was an all-potent presence to the wandering senses

then. At times they heard snatches of the old, old familiar airs that had soothed and sent them to sleep as children. What a rush of sacred memories came with these old airs! Then, it was the clear voice of a soprano, like a silver thread running through a brocade of gold, as it rose in some soul-inspiring anthem. There were voices that they knew well; and voices that they had forgotten, but they peopled the air and called on them by name, and were none the less real to their wearied senses.

It was early morn, and Dick Travers sat with a set, preoccupied face, looking out upon the gloom, and the snow that still drifted at intervals into the cave; he could now distinguish Mrs. Tredennis, who was lying on the other side opposite him, her face now looking thin and wasted, resting upon that old coat, which he would insist upon her using. She was asleep; it did not look much like the face of one to whom death was an agony, for her lips were slightly parted and there was a smile upon them.

But her face wavered in the uncertain light, and the smile vanished; a kaleidoscopic flash of broken thoughts and ideas in his weary brain, and then—

Noon, in a tropical Australian forest, with a burnished sun set in a cloudless sky of blue. A stockman's hut peeping from a dense mass of greenery, with its bark roof, and overshadowed by giant-trees from whose branches great wreaths of

trailing vines covered with flowers of purple, and white, and scarlet hang. There are golden wattle, ruellia and hybiscus blossoms. Rare orchids and grotesque, antler-like and fleshy ferns, called, happily, the "Stag's Horn," stand out from the smooth, white bark of the gum tree. Among the interweaving boughs are flocks of showy birds; there are flocks of gaudy parrots and parroquets, whose plumage flashes in the sunlight with a striking brilliancy. There are not more colours on a butterfly's wing than in this corner of Eden.

Noon exactly, and the sun right overhead; and now the hitherto noisy screaming of the gay birds is hushed, and there is a deathly silence. Even the insect world is still; only a peculiarly giddy specimen of the grasshopper family occasionally forgets itself, and indulges in a shrill treble of piping; but soon finding that no one joins in the chorus, relapses into silence again.

Dick is resting in the hut on a rough bench, with an upturned saddle for a rest behind his head, looking out between waking and sleeping, into the dim vistas of the pre-Adamite forest.

Thought, that can circle the globe while yet the magnetic current that man has made subservient to his will, has not passed from darkness into light, inscrutable are thy ways! For in sleep, that is the image of death, has time and space been annihilated.

And the spirit of the sleeper has passed away again—thousands of miles across a slumbering world, and over leagues of sleeping seas.

It is an Old-Country meadow in the springtime ; and he is walking with some one by his side, who has become dearer to him than any one else on earth, and who has promised to be his wife. He is the happiest man in the wide, wide world, and there is not a cloud on the sky of his happiness. He is looking into the face of her, in whose eyes he seems to see mirrored purity and truth. He would as soon think of doubting the fact of his own existence as doubt her nobility of soul.

And then some one calls him ; or is it only one of those mocking, phantom voices ?

Hush ! for God's sake, do not break the spell that will drag the happy dreamer back to the hideous living death !

But the spell is broken, and the sleeper awakes ; for the woman had called out in a dream the name of the man, and he, as it were mechanically, repeats hers. His dream is shivered, like the face of a landscape on a broken mirror ; and the awful present, with its grim twin shadows, Famine and Death, is hovering over him ; and because they will not put an end to his suffering, a horror crushes down upon his soul. And this, then, is the end of all things.

A muddy, wan dawn-light is struggling into the

cave. Dick rises and goes over to where the woman is. Within the last few days she had been a revelation to him ; he had not believed that it were possible for a woman to show so much fortitude under such straits. She had cheered him, when dark thoughts had crowded upon him, as a helpmate in life might have done ; and though sometimes there was a bitterness in his thoughts towards her, his intercourse with her had weakened them. The inherent qualities of the man of honour within him had overmastered a growing feeling—a renewal of the old fire—which he knew was dangerous, for both of them. She was the first to speak.

"Good-morning, Dick, do you know, I was dreaming about you," she said, and stopped, as if she had said more than she intended to say.

"And I of you," he quietly said ; "people do dream such absurd things sometimes."

How petty, how human—pitifully human—was this man after all !

And in another instant he had cursed himself, as he saw the sudden look of dumb anguish in her face. Could he not let this poor long-suffering woman be ? Why should he let this devil within him move him with remembrances of the past, just when he fancied himself most secure, and done with it for ever ? Was she not expiating her sin with her life ?

He looked towards the mouth of the cave, and a cry sprang to his lips.

The snow had ceased, and the atmosphere was clear as a summer's day ; but it was cold.

In a second he was another man ; and his bitter, morbid thoughts left him.

" Mrs. Tredennis," he said, " we shall soon end this weary waiting. The time has come for me to do something ; but you must stop where you are. I shall try to climb the cliff—once on the bench and they might see me for miles ; they will be out searching for us by this time. Now listen to what I have to say : do not attempt to leave this place—at least, for several hours ; if I am to get to the camp at all I shall have got there before that time, and have brought or sent help to you. Anyhow, I shall tear some of the lining from this coat, and place it out on the terrace upon the snow, so that any one on the brow of the cliff may see it."

He stopped suddenly and looked into her face, and his breath came quickly. It was a hard thing to communicate to her what he intended saying ; for that old love of her, which for the last few days had been like a slow fire burning within him, had flared up for the minute, and bade fair to become his master. He knew that, if he failed in his attempt to scale the cliff, he would take chances on his life by dropping over the terrace, and landing in a bank of snow. Anyhow, it was ten chances to one that he would never reach the camp. But now so near the end of the tragedy, and face to face with Death, he

determined that he would be true to his better self; and perhaps the Great Judge would deal more mercifully with him, in that he was faithful in the end. He continued—

“Should we not happen to meet again, I want you to know, that if there is anything in the past that you think requires my forgiveness, consider it as disposed of. I do not think it is presuming too much on my part to say this; it has not been done without thinking well over it. I hope you will forget the many cruel and foolish things I have said to you; if you could comprehend the state of mind in which they were uttered, you would have little difficulty in forgiving them. I thought I was more of a man until I met you again. You must keep your spirits up; they are bound to find you before long if I should happen to miss them.” And then, as if to rob the nature of the farewell of some of its tragedy, he perpetrated a joke that was pathetic in its very littleness—he reminded her of what the rat said, when it left its tail in the trap, about the best of friends parting.

And then he said “Good-bye.”

There was something very pathetic in the pitiable little smile that lit up her face, like a stray gleam of sunshine, just then.

(Could mortal man match the subtlety of the game the devil played now?)

He held out his hand, but would not trust himself to look at her.

She took his hand and held it in her own ; but she would not let it go ; and there was a light in her eyes that he had seen there on more than one occasion.

" Dick ! " she cried, in a voice that shook as if with some passion that strove to gain the mastery over her, " I cannot let you go like this. There is something that I thought it would be better for you never to know, and that I could have told you of when you came to the ranche, but which, at the time, I thought would be dangerous to tell you. Be brave and hear, for I must tell it. As I swear before my Maker, whom I may have to meet before many hours, I did not throw you over for Tom Tredennis, until they told me that you were married. Your letters which had stopped coming, and other proofs which they produced, confirmed me in what they said. It is the old story, Dick ; in a moment of pique, and to show them how I could forget such a one as you—though you had broken my heart—I married Tredennis. He had no hand in the frauds that were practised on me, nor do I believe that he even knew of your existence. He was the 'desirable party' that my people wanted me to marry, and I married him. When I met you, and saw how you had been wronged, and not the wrongdoer, I felt that I could not trust you to know the truth ; I could hardly trust myself. Now, you know why I kept this from you. Let the truth make no difference to us now ; only, perhaps, think of me with more of pity than of anger

—I was to blame, in that I ought to have known you better. For heaven's sake, go, and I will pray for you !”

Like a man who has been blind for years, and suddenly beholds the light of day, he stood dazed, and as if he could not believe the evidence of his own senses.

Of such are the supreme moments in our lives—for good or evil.

Then the full light of the truth flashed upon him. He knew now the reason of her strange conduct, and why she had not hesitated to release her hold upon him when they were slipping over the cliff together.

It was more than poor, weak, mortal man could bear. Honour, and the high moral standpoint he had taken up, were flung to the winds. He took one step towards her, and, taking her unresisting form in his arms, clasped her to his breast, and pressed his lips again and again upon her fevered cheek.

Surely, it was something more than human that came to his aid just then. He released her, and staggered back. How had he sunk so low ! Where, was the *man* in him now ?

“May God forgive me for what I have done. I am a villain after all,” he cried, in a broken voice.

But there was no resentment in the voice or on the face of the woman as she said—

“May God forgive us both, Dick. Perhaps, if we are spared, we will lead better lives for having passed

through this. But let us make sure of it: let us make a compact right now—that, if we get out of this alive, we will rise superior to our pasts; and that we will make our old love a stepping-stone to something higher and nobler. I wronged you in thinking that you could not bear the truth—it was judging you by my own standard.”

“I can bear the truth,” he said; “what I could not bear was the thought that you could be false to me.”

And these two hard-pressed and weary mortals, who stood face to face with Death—whose lives had been separated and wrecked by a cruel fate, and with only the unseen eye of the Omniscient to witness it—proved the nobility of Man, whom God has made after His own image.

She held out her hand to him, and reverently he carried it to his lips, and left the cave.

Death could do its worst now—they had saved their immortal souls.

And who will say that there is no good in human nature after all?

Jack Holmes, and the two Miss Daltons had fared somewhat differently from their two companions, whom they had left in the neighbourhood of the Devil's Playground. They had good, warm buffalo robes which would keep out any degree of cold; and the picnic baskets, under the generalship of Miss Dalton, kept them from feeling the pangs of hunger.

But still, every bite of food they took, reminded them of those who might at that very moment be perishing miserably for want of it; so that, upon the whole, they were not so reconciled to an impending fate, as those who were in greater danger and suffered more.

On the second day, however, the two horses broke loose, and, travelling up the creek, struck the camp where Tredennis and the others were. These individuals, happening to look out, and seeing the horses, were not slow to arrive at a correct conclusion.

"They are down the creek," Reynolds said; "the minute it clears, if we go down on snow-shoes, we are sure to find them. If we went just now we would only be getting lost; besides, we might pass within a few yards of them and not see them, and that would only make matters worse."

Next morning, at dawn, the snow suddenly ceased falling, and the wind went down. In three minutes the party was ready, and it was observed that the practical Reynolds coiled his lariat around his body, and took it with him. Briggs was left in the camp to keep on the fires and look after the horses; and the others, accompanied by the three Indians, started out. These three landed gentry were remarkable individuals in their way, and their names were still more remarkable examples—so far as nomenclature was concerned. One was called, as interpreted, "Young-man-afraid-of-his-grandmother"; another,

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"I-hear-him-calling" ; and the third rejoiced in the distinction of "Crooked-legs." They were true to the traditions of their race in that they were stoics. But still, they proved themselves human after all, when Cousin Ned somewhat hindered the progress of the party, by insisting on diving head first into every snowbank he came to. The toes of his shoes had a most unaccountable predilection for sampling the drift ; indeed, every now and again all that could be seen of the little man was a couple of snow-shoes flourishing in air. On these occasions "Crooked-legs," and the man who was accredited with standing in fear of his maternal relation, would pull him out bodily by the legs and arms, and set him on his feet again, with many a wondering "Ough ! Ough !"

After a couple of hours' travel, the missing party, consisting of the two girls and Holmes, was discovered : they had left their camp, and were making their way laboriously up the creek. They were little the worse from their prolonged exposure, but were still in a sorry plight. "I-hear-him-calling" was sent to pilot them back to the main camp by a route that was comparatively free of snow, and which only an Indian could have picked out. They had wanted to go back, and wait in their late camp until the rest of the party had brought in the other two missing ones, but Tredennis would not hear of it, and ordered them back to the camp. Holmes pointed out the direction in which the ill-fated valley lay, and, as

Reynolds and the Indians knew it, they started off again.

Another hour, and the glare of the sun was causing them some discomfort. They could not be more than a couple of miles now from the Devil's Playground.

Suddenly one of the Indians raised a shout, and pointed ahead; there was a dark speck, like a bird, picked out upon the dazzling plain, or bench. What was it? They trudged on in a painful state of uncertainty. Then the tiny speck became a dark object—a bundle of rags it might have been, so far as appearances went—and they were within a hundred yards of it. They pushed on with beating and anxious hearts.

It was the figure of a man—"Dick!" they cried.

The heart of Tredennis sank within him as he saw the figure of this man, or corpse, whichever it was, lying prostrate on the snow. Where, then, was his wife?

Had they come too late?

One of the Indians reached the prostrate figure first, and raised the head. It was a solemn moment in the great silence that ensued. The others stopped short within a few feet of the Indian, and waited with parted lips, and hearts that almost ceased to beat, to hear the dreaded announcement.

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"He is —?" Tredennis cried; but did not
finish the sentence.

"*Dead!*" said the stoic in Cree, and Reynolds
interpreted.

CHAPTER XIX.

CHECKMATED.

BUT the Indian's keen instincts had deceived him for once; for Dick was not dead, but only in a stupor, which as nearly resembled that condition as it were possible to, and not be actually dead. And to Cousin Ned must be ascribed the honour of discovering it. That individual having studied medicine in his youth, ere riches came to him, observing some signs on the face of Dick that were not consistent with death, took a step nearer the body. But, somehow, his snow-shoes got mixed up with his legs, and, instead of taking a step forward, he dived head first right into the arms of "Young-man-afraid-of-his-grandmother," and bowled that gentleman over like a nine-pin.

"Ough! Ough!" groaned the Indians.

Truly, Tragedy and Comedy walk side by side through the world.

"For goodness sake put a flask to his lips, and chafe his hands," cried Cousin Ned, ignoring the

Indians, and unable to get there himself. They worked like men possessed, and in a few minutes Dick showed signs of coming to. He opened his eyes and looked strangely at them for a second or two, and then, as recognition came back into them, he cried out in a faint and querulous voice, "Over the cliff, to the left there, for mercy's sake, hurry up—follow my tracks!" Then he slipped back again into the realms of unconsciousness.

They left Cousin Ned, and an Indian with him, to bring him round again, and chafe his numbed limbs. The others followed up the tracks for half a mile or so, and came to the place where Dick had scaled the cliff, overlooking the Devil's Playground.

There they found the lining of the coat that Dick had been unable to set up; there being neither stick nor stone to enable him to do so. Reynolds stationed Tredennis and the Indian at the top of the cliff—he would not trust Tredennis to descend—and instructing them to hold on to the end of the rope, he flung it over the cliff, and began to let himself down by it.

"How, in the name of all that's wonderful, that poor, starved Dick ever scaled this cliff," Reynolds muttered, "is beyond my comprehension! It was the grit in the beggar; that's what did it!"

And now, can any of those cynics, who will take such significantly narrow and ignoble views of human nature, say how it is that some men when fighting

for their own lives, only make a feeble and apathetic stand ; but when the lives of others are depending on their exertions, will fight like tigers, as long as there is a spark of life left in their bodies ?

Reynold's lowered himself down easily. He could see at one place where Travers must have lost his hold, and fallen some considerable distance. " It licks me how the beggar wasn't killed ! " he muttered. Then he came to a narrow ledge, and travelling along it, soon struck the mouth of the cave. He saw the figure of a woman sitting by it, who, when she saw him coming, sprang to her feet, and tottering, sank to the ground, as if from weakness. Her indomitable courage had held her up till then ; but the grim twin shadows, afraid that their prey was slipping from their hands, now pressed her hard. To apply restoratives was the work of a few seconds. When she opened her eyes, and was assured by Reynolds that the rest of the party were safe, and that they had found Travers, she seemed to take fresh heart and nerved herself for the task of ascending the cliff. Reynolds tied the rope securely round her waist, and her husband pulled her to the top.

Perhaps not till then had Mrs. Tredennis properly understood her husband. To all appearance he was only a man of ordinary parts, and undemonstrative ; but then, still waters run deep.

Perhaps it was the inherent loyalty in his own heart that made him slow to imagine disloyalty in

others; it is the jealous man, the cynic, and the sickly pessimist, who, judging others by their own standard, are always seeing the seamy side of things.

How much of the story of the past Mrs. Tredennis told her husband no chivalrous and sensible reader will care to know. This only may be said, that it served to draw these closer together who had been in considerable danger of drifting apart. Moreover, it made Tom Tredennis swear—and he could do it in the most approved old English style—that if his brother-in-law, who was a Cabinet Minister, had any influence at all, he would get a billet worthier of the man, whom he believed had saved the life of his wife, than that which he now occupied. He kept his word; and it was on the strength of this billet that Dick afterwards took a very sensible step.

As if they were ashamed over their defeat in the tragic end their presiding evil genius had meditated, the grim, uncouth monsters in the Devil's Playground hid their ugly forms under heavy panoplies of snow. They were now almost irrerecognisable; but there was a sinister, lurking air about them all the same, that in the growing shadows seemed to say, "You have escaped us this time, but wait, our time will come yet."

But it is extremely unlikely that they will ever have a similar chance again. They were the pawns and pieces that the devil played with when he

allured his intended victims thither. But he made too sure of his game ; staked everything on one bold move, played into the hands of his opponents—and lost.

The return journey to the camp was a slow and arduous one ; but the Indians proved inventive geniuses. For when they arrived at the creek, they constructed, with the aid of some boughs, and the axe and rope that Reynolds had brought, a species of sledge on which the two worn-out ones were placed, and dragged them over the slippery crust of snow to the camp. With a little nourishment discreetly administered, Mrs. Tredennis, and Dick, were soon out of danger, although weak.

There was, indeed, reason for congratulation in that camp ; indeed, it is vouched for by Briggs, that Cousin Ned, and "Young-man-afraid-of-his-grand-mother," were seen to go behind a tent and apply their lips, in succession, to a flask containing the deadly but not unpleasant fire-water. They camped in that spot for two days, before those who had suffered in the snow-storm were sufficiently recovered to proceed ; and in that time a Chinook wind—the warm wind that finds its way over from the Pacific—had come and cleared away the snow like magic, making travelling possible again.

But Dick Travers was not to recover quite so easily ; for when he got to the ranche it was discovered he had broken a couple of ribs, and received some

other injuries when he had fallen back over the cliff. His not revealing this sooner, could only be accounted for by the fact, that he had not wished to delay their journey thither. So it came about that he was no better than a helpless cripple for some weeks. During that time he was waited upon by a certain fair-haired young lady, who seemed to take a very particular interest in him. She was a very beautiful, as well as a noble-minded girl ; and there was something in the life of this man that had attracted her. That he was poor, and that she was very rich, was a disturbing element in this unselfish girl's dreams ; had their positions been reversed she thought, then he might have thought of her.

But trust another woman for finding out such things, for Mrs. Tredennis discovered her secret ; and, perhaps, it was only safe and wise to tell her a little of the history of the past, just enough to let her understand that it was dead and done with, and would clear the way for a brighter future. Then, like a sensible woman, Mrs. Tredennis let things take their natural course.

As for Dick, being only an ordinary mortal, but a healthy one withal, the revealing of the truth, such as it was, soothed and healed his outraged sense of justice. A calmer and more sensible view of things, put an end to what now seemed to have been incipient madness. In nine cases out of ten—and Dick's was one of the nine—it is the torture of uncertainty that does all

the mischief; but he proved his words in that he could face the truth.

Now it needs no psychologist to explain how that the past effectually disposed of, there grew up in his heart with his fresh faith in human nature, a feeling which, if it were not love in the old, selfish, and passionate sense, was one that was pure and wholesome. And the girl who would not have exchanged her self-constituted position as his devoted nurse, for all the wealth she was mistress of, was the object of it.

There are three great factors that shape the course of all mundane affairs: and they are time; that comprehensive quality we are pleased to call human nature; and opportune action; and it is perhaps needless to say, they brought about a certain happy consummation.

The hills are old, but love is older still: the former become worn and scarred by the hand of Time, and change the course of rivers; but the ways of the little blind god are always the same.

THE END.

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